



**BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY**

.....

**BHAGAWAN  
PARASHURAMA**

**Part II**

**K. M. Munshi**

**GENERAL EDITORS**

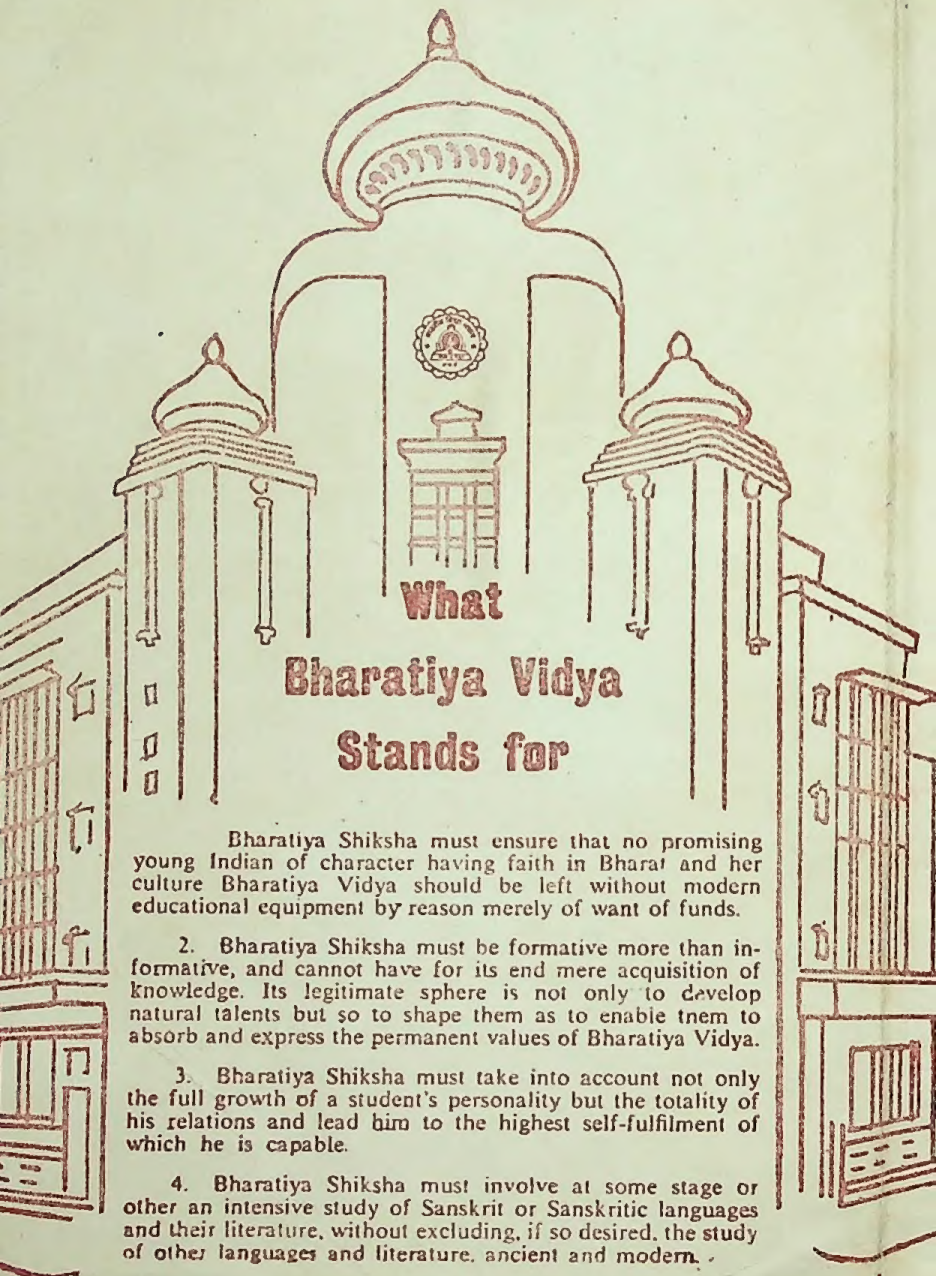
**K. M. MUNSHI**

**R. R. DIWAKAR**

.....



**BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN. BOMBAY**



**What**

## **Bharatiya Vidya Stands for**

Bharatiya Shiksha must ensure that no promising young Indian of character having faith in Bharat and her culture Bharatiya Vidya should be left without modern educational equipment by reason merely of want of funds.

2. Bharatiya Shiksha must be formative more than informative, and cannot have for its end mere acquisition of knowledge. Its legitimate sphere is not only to develop natural talents but so to shape them as to enable them to absorb and express the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya.

3. Bharatiya Shiksha must take into account not only the full growth of a student's personality but the totality of his relations and lead him to the highest self-fulfilment of which he is capable.

4. Bharatiya Shiksha must involve at some stage or other an intensive study of Sanskrit or Sanskritic languages and their literature, without excluding, if so desired, the study of other languages and literature, ancient and modern.



5. The re-integration of Bharatiya Vidya, which is the primary object of Bharatiya Shiksha, can only be attained through a study of forces, movements, motives, idas, forms and art of creative life-energy through which it has expressed itself in different ages as a single continuous process.

6. Bharatiya Shiksha must stimulate the student's power of expression, both written and oral, at every stage in accordance with the highest ideals attained by the great literary masters in the intellectual and moral spheres.

7 The technique of Bharatiya Shiksha must involve—

(a) the adoption by the teacher of the *Guru* attitude which consists in taking a personal interest in the student; inspiring and encouraging him to achieve distinction in his studies; entering into his life with a view to form ideals and remove psychological obstacles; and creating in him a spirit of consecration; and

(b) the adoption by the student of the *Shishya* attitude by the development of—

(i) respect for the teacher,

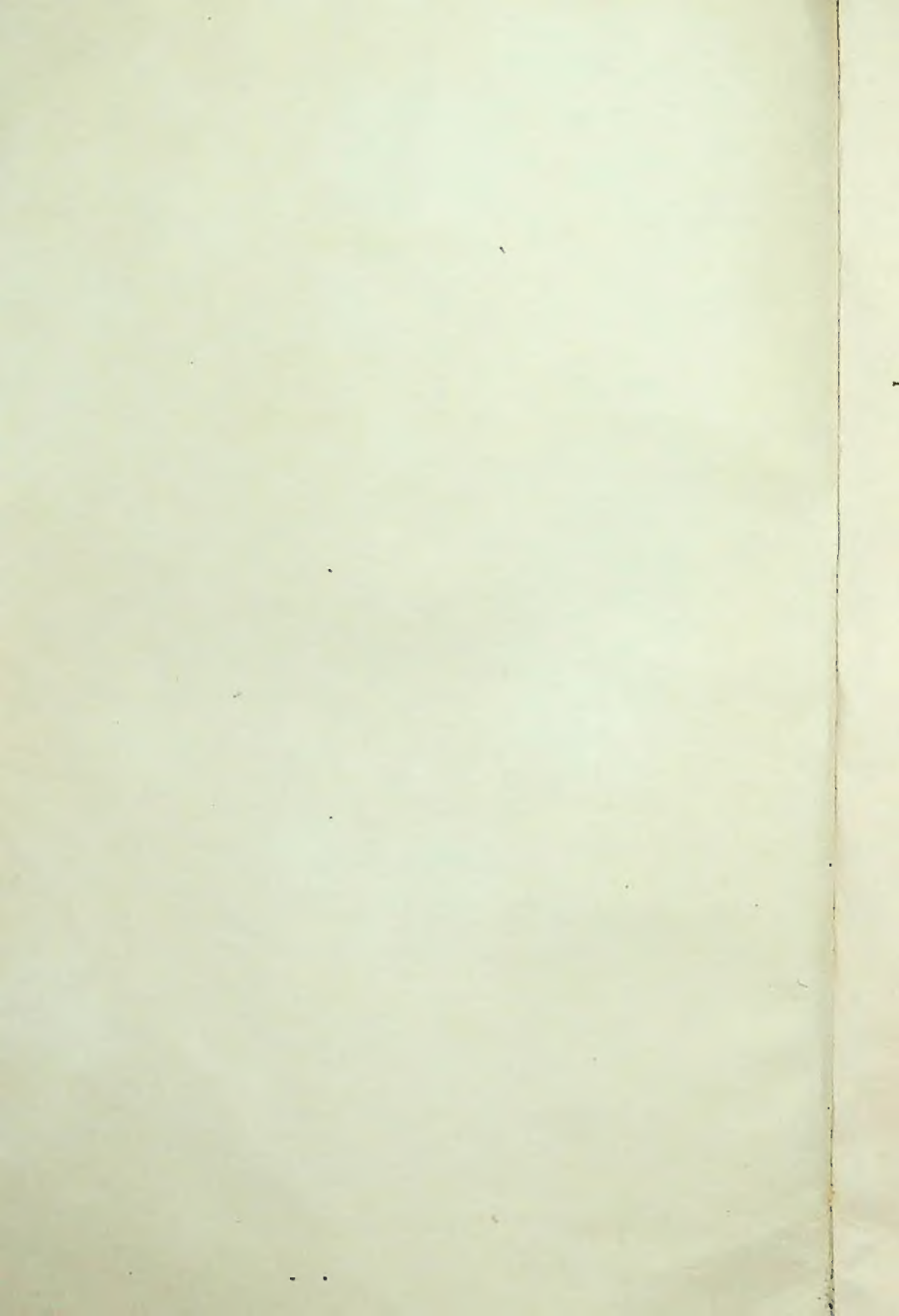
(ii) a spirit of inquiry,

(iii) a spirit of service towards the teacher, the institution, Bharat and Bharatiya Vidya.

8. The ultimate aim of Bharatiya Shiksha is to teach the younger generation to appreciate and live up to the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya which flowing from the supreme art of creative life-energy as represented by Shri Ramachandra, Shri Krishna, Vyasa, Buddha and Mahavira have expressed themselves in modern times in the life of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and Swami Vivekananda, Shri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi.

9. Bharatiya Shiksha while equipping the student with every kind of scientific and technical training must teach the student, not to sacrifice an ancient form or attitude to an unreasoning passion for change; not to retain a form or attitude which in the light of modern times can be replaced by another form or attitude which is a truer and more effective expression of the spirit of Bharatiya Vidya; and to capture the spirit afresh for each generation to present it to the world







आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतः ।

*Let noble thoughts come to us from every side*

—Rigveda, 1-89-1

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## BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

*General Editors*

K. M. MUNSHI

R. R. DIWAKAR

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BHAGAWAN PARASHURAMA

PART II

BY

K. M. MUNSHI

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# BHAGAWAN PARASHURAMA

## PART II

BY  
K. M. MUNSHI



1965

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN

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## GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages and was to be priced at Rs. 2.50.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of the Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible

to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita* by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata*: "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita* which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

1, Queen Victoria Road,  
New Delhi,  
3rd October 1951.

K. M. MUNSHI



## INTRODUCTION

This is the English summary of my novel in Gujarati of the same name.

It was published as a serial in the *Bhavan's Journal*, and issued in book form in 1959. That edition had to be compressed on account of my having to go on a world tour. The present edition is a fuller one, thanks to the help given by Smt. Kamala Subramaniam.

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,  
Bombay:  
June 28, 1965.

K. M. MUNSHI



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## RAMA ARRIVES IN SAURASHTRA

Three months after Arjuna, king of the Haihayas, left Aryavarta for his own kingdom, quite a crowd had collected on the shores of the sea, near Prabhas in Saurashtra, watching the distant horizon.

News had already come that King Arjuna of the Thousand Arms was returning from Aryavarta with Rama, the son of the Great Bhrigu Sage, Jamādagni, and the grandson of Maha Atharvan, who forty years ago had left the land in disgust and cursed its people. For forty years the Haihaya, the Yadava, the Talajangha and the Sharyata clans, all of which formed the Haihaya confederacy, had waited for the great and glad news. Now the Guru will be in their midst, the curse will be lifted, and the Gods will bless the people of this land.

The crowd was anxiously watching the horizon. Several ships were sighted, but they were all tossing about, lashed by the stormy sea. However, of all ships, one ship was sailing straight towards the shore in advance of the others, riding the stormy waves in spite of the wind. The people who were collected on the shore looked at this one ship with amazement; it appeared as if it was untouched by the wind and the wave. And as it came nearer they could espy on its deck a handsome boy, dominating the storms as Lord Varuna himself, his leonine mane flying in the wind.

When that ship came nearer and halted a little away from the shore and duly anchored, the boy jumped from the deck and swam to the shore. King Bhadrashrenya of the Yadava clan also jumped from the deck and swam after him to the shore.

As Rama—for it was really he—came to the shore walking in knee-deep water, an old and gaunt warrior rushed forward from the crowd and prostrated himself before him.

"Gurudeva, grandson of Maha Atharvan, I fall at your feet," he said. Rama shook his mane, extended his hand in blessing with a solemn air, scarcely possible in a boy of his age, and said, "May you live a hundred autumns."

Suddenly, people knew who he was. He was the grandson of Maha Atharvan, and the crowd, which contained quite a few old warriors who had seen the old Sage in their youth, rushed forward, fell at the feet of Rama and sought his blessings.

A few horsemen arrived on the scene. Among them were the kings of Sharyatas and Talajanghas, two of the clans which formed the confederacy of the Haihayas, of which Arjuna was the head. As both the kings got down from their horses, King Bhadrashrenya said, "Brother, this is the Master, grandson of Maha Atharvan." Both the kings prostrated themselves before Rama.

In the meantime, two sailors brought the seasick Lomaharshini to the shore. Rama said to Bhadrashrenya, "Send Lomaharshini to the palace." Bhadrashrenya turned to his son, "Prateep, you go with her."

All of a sudden, a cry of distress rose from the crowd. The three ships, in one of which was King Arjuna himself, and which was being tossed about in the storm, capsized.

"Bhadrashrenya, we must save him," said Rama. "Come. Let us get the boats moving."

"Master, the sailors and myself will go there. You stay here," said Bhadrashrenya.



"No," said Rama. He rushed into the sea and began to swim back towards the helpless people who were struggling in the sea a few hundred yards away.

Throughout the outward journey from Aryavarta, Arjuna of the Thousand Arms had been angry with Bhadrashrenya, with his men, with the Gods and the fates. He had been furious when he heard that Bhadrashrenya, instead of kidnapping Loma, had also brought the impertinent Jamadagni's son whom he hated most, with her. But Bhadrashrenya was his maternal uncle, his staunchest supporter, the General of all the clans. On the death of his father, Mahishmat, it was he who had secured the succession for Arjuna.

Bhadrashrenya was also one of the two persons in the world of whom the king stood in fear, the other being his queen Mriga; but he could never do without the wisdom and statesmanship of these two, and so had often to submit to their wishes. But now Arjuna could never forgive Bhadrashrenya for his folly in bringing Rama with him. The boy stood guard over Loma all the time, and Bhadrashrenya and all his warriors had begun to worship him as if he was a God. This hurt Arjuna's pride. However, being as astute as he was ferocious, he did not think it wise to vent his temper on Bhadrashrenya during the journey.

During the last few hours of the journey, he had been mad with pain and anger. The ship in which he was voyaging had been in great danger. Its sails had been snapped asunder. Its sailors had been praying to the Gods in despair. He himself had been seasick, as he had never been in his life.

As if that was not enough, the ship which carried Rama had gone forward merrily in spite of storm and wind. Arjuna could not bear to see Rama standing non-

chalantly on the deck of that ship, as if he was the God Maruta, the God of the Storm. Unnerved by seasickness, a superstitious awe had begun to creep on Arjuna. This boy was the grandson of Maha Atharvan. He was his hereditary Guru. There was something in the boy which he could not fathom. He could not even kill him. He did not know what to do with him. Was he a God? Or was he a walking curse?

Even after Bhadrashrenya and Rama rescued Arjuna and he had to spend a couple of days in bed, Arjuna was very exasperated. He had thought that he was bringing Rama as a captive to his capital, but it was Rama and Bhadrashrenya who had saved him from death. Three of the four kings of Saurashtra had already accepted the boy as their Guru. All this was the result of the foolish way in which Bhadrashrenya had behaved. Unable to do anything to Rama he decided to punish at least Bhadrashrenya at the earliest opportunity.

Before Arjuna could decide upon a course of action, a messenger came from his queen Mriga and Guru Mrikund now looking after his realm from Mahishmati. He conveyed the message that the king of Lanka had invaded the south bank of the Narmada; that his progress had to be immediately arrested; that it was, therefore, essential that he should return immediately to the capital.

Sahasrarjuna immediately saw the chance. He pressed the four hundred Sharyata and Talajangha warriors into his service and ordered that they should accompany him.

Then he called his uncle Bhadrashrenya, "Uncle, I am going to war with the king of Lanka."

"Yes, I know. I am ready to come with you," said Bhadrashrenya.

"No, I have some work for you."

"What? Other work for me!" Bhadrashrenya asked Arjuna in surprise. Never had Arjuna gone to war without him, the General of all the allied Haihaya armies.

Arjuna's eyes shone with malicious glee. "You have some work to attend to here. You have to look after your Gurudeva and Loma. Take them to the settlement of your Yadavas near Girnar. And take care; if you let either of them to escape...." began Arjuna threateningly.

Bhadrashrenya interjected in anger, "Then what?"

"I shall see that not a single Yadava remains alive," said Arjuna in an equally angry voice.

"Will you go to war with the Lord of Lanka without me?" asked the General.

"I am your pupil, and, uncle, I am not likely to commit any mistake in war," said Arjuna ironically. "I am taking with me all the horses and all the young men of your clan—except yourself. Uncle, I have given my orders. Proceed towards Girnar. I am starting for Mahishmati tomorrow morning."

Bhadrashrenya remained silent. He realised that Arjuna had wrested from him the high office he held, robbed him of his warlike youth and converted him into no better than gaoler of Rama. Now his power was only of an ornamental king of his small Yadava clan.

Sahasrarjuna laughed uproariously at his uncle's discomfiture. Next day he left for Mahishmati.

## YADAVA GOTRA

After Arjuna of the Thousand Arms, or, as he was called, Sahasrarjuna, left for Mahishmati, King Bhadrashrenya was heart-broken. He was no longer the general of the allied Haihaya forces; no longer would he lead the armies to conquest as he did before. He was only the king of the small Yadava clan, upon whom had descended the wrath of King Arjuna.

When Bhadrashrenya started for the settlement at Girnar accompanied by Rama and Loma, Rama, with a perception rare in a boy of his age, caught up with Bhadrashrenya and rode by his side for some time in silent sympathy.

"King, you are no longer the general of Arjuna, I understand. Isn't it true?" asked Rama affectionately.

"Yes, it is true."

"That was because of me, was not it?" asked Rama almost apologetically, for he did not want to wound the susceptibilities of Bhadrashrenya.

The king gave no reply.

"That is all to the good. We shall now be able to spread *Dharma*," said Rama with his bewitching smile.

These kind words were a balm to Bhadrashrenya's wounded pride, and he felt a little relieved.

"Gurudeva, I am only anxious to serve you," he said.

"Yes, we have still to teach *Dharma* to Sahasrarjuna."

Whenever Rama said something of this kind, Bhadrashrenya was lost in admiration. This young boy knew neither fear nor malice. He could not be deceived. Words, sweet or bitter, had no effect on him. His confidence was never shaken. He never indulged in idle

thinking. He did not swerve from *Dharma* nor did he allow anybody to do so.

"Our *Dharma* is to uplift the Yadavas," Rama said slowly.

"My Yadavas are very brave," said Bhadrashrenya.

"They will go about as fearlessly as the lions do in the forest," said Rama.

This confidence was infectious. "I am only anxious about one thing. Now that I am no longer the general of the Haihaya army, what will happen to my Yadavas?" asked Bhadrashrenya.

"Why do you worry, King? Am I not here?"

Again Bhadrashrenya looked at this boy in wonder. Would this Bhargava save his Yadavas?

It was evening when Rama and Loma, with their retainers, arrived at the foot of Mount Ujjayant or Girnar, where the Yadava *gotra* had camped for the season.

The *gotra* travelled from place to place, according to the needs of their cattle. However, in summer every year, they camped here. Water was freely available only in this part of arid Saurashtra.

Most of the carts of the Yadavas were covered with grass mats, under which women and children gathered during the hot part of the day. Near each cart was a small hut of grass or dried leaves of trees, in which men sat during the day and married men slept at night with their wives.

In front of each cart was a fire on which the women of the family cooked their food.

The sun was setting. Women sat round the fires cooking, gossiping, shouting. In some open places between the carts, children were playing or quarrelling with each other. Dwarfish and dark Nagas, slaves of the rich Yadavas, went



to and fro, their masters shouting at them at the top of their voice.

Many Yadavas were returning from the forests with their goats, sheep, cows and buffaloes, their only wealth. They had some fine horses too, whom like all Aryas they worshipped, for they were the source of their joy and pride and their strength in war. It was now time to feed them and see that they were well settled for the night.

Vijaya, the headman of the Yadavas, was very unhappy. As he climbed down from his cart, after his usual siesta, he looked anxiously at the sky to see if there was any cloud. The Yadavas, he felt, were very unfortunate; for five years now, they had wandered in vain from place to place in search of a home where there was ample water. But the monsoon had failed last year and even this favourite camping ground of theirs, where the rivers ran with water all the year round, was drying up. He wished he could take the *gotra* to some better place, but where was there a better place?

To this anxiety was added the shock which the last visit of the dreaded Arjuna to the settlement had produced on him. Arjuna had suddenly descended upon this settlement and called upon him to contribute 400 horsemen to his army. There was no way to deny the king whatever he wanted. He was a wicked man, this Sahasrarjuna, cruel and ferocious. If Vijaya had hesitated even a little, he would have taken the horses all the same. With great difficulty, therefore, the old headman had found 350 horsemen for him. But more than the loss of these fine young men and horses, what shattered Vijaya's old nerves, was Arjuna's wrath toward his other King. When he enquired about King Bhadrashrenya, Arjuna's face was aflame with anger.

"Bhadrashrenya, your King! Ha, Ha," he laughed

cruelly. "He will come, he will come, but later."

"Isn't he going with you to the war?" asked the headman.

"Your King has become useless for war. Too old. And when he comes, tell him that he should look after my two guests till I call him, and if he does not obey my orders, I will wipe out the whole Yadava clan."

These fearful words still echoed in the ears of Vijaya. Bhadrashrenya, his King, was the maternal uncle of Arjuna. He had taught Arjuna when a boy how to wield arms; he had put him on the throne; and now he was discarded by the ungrateful nephew. But what could be done? The whole Yadava clan was not as strong as it once was. And there was no water even in the valley of Girnar.

Vijaya shook his old head in despair. The Yadavas appeared to be doomed. Since Maha Atharvan left his land and cursed it, the Gods had been angry with them. What else could happen when Arjuna had installed an imposter like Mrikund as his guru and his son Kukshivan as the High-Priest of the Yadavas?

Vijaya proceeded towards the hut of the High-Priest. As he treaded his way through the maze of carts and huts and fires, he saw children quarrelling with each other, women fighting for a little water. He heard complaints that cows were dying for want of water. There was only one way to escape this calamity, thought the old headman. The King of Anarta had sent an invitation to bring the *gotra* to the banks of river Sabarmati, where ample water was available. He would have led his people to the banks of Sabarmati long ago had it not been for the news that King Bhadrashrenya was soon coming back to Saurashtra. Vijaya wished he had not waited so long. But now Arjuna had ordered him not to leave this place. But

surely, how could he allow his people to die for want of water?

The headman went to Kukshi's hut. Vijaya hated this fat man heartily. He was no more fit to be High-Priest than he was fit to run a race with young boys. Kukshi was wicked, he lived in luxury, he did not care for his Yadavas. But the Yadavas had to accept him as High-Priest for he had been forced upon them by Arjuna. In fact he was no better than an agent and a spy of the king of the Haihayas.

Vijaya went to the hut of Kukshi and told him that he had decided to move the camp from here to the banks of Sabarmati.

Kukshi was, however, firm. "You can't go from here. King Arjuna has commanded you to stay here till he returned from the war."

"But he may not return from the war for ten years," remonstrated Vijaya with irritation. "If he issues orders like this, why does he not send a few hundred pots of water? He takes away our young men, he takes away our horses, he takes away our cows. All that he has not taken, is our life. Whether my king Bhadrashrenya comes or not, I am moving my camp to-day or tomorrow."

"Don't be rash. I will send a man to Mahishmati and get permission for you to move," said Kukshi.

"Why have I to take the permission of any one before I move my carts somewhere else?" asked the headman.

Suddenly wild shouts of joy were heard from a distance. The boys had given up playing and were running towards the place from where the sound of neighing horses was heard, shouting "The King has come."

Suddenly the air was cloven by the sharp blast of a

conch. It evoked old memories in the heart of Vijaya, the headman. It was the typical blast of the lord of the Bhrigus. He had heard it years and years ago, never thereafter. Who had played the conch in the way the Master used to do, wondered Vijaya.

Vijaya took the help of two youngsters and hurried to the border of the settlement as fast as his aged legs could carry him. When he reached the spot, the Yadavas had surrounded their king, giving vent to affectionate and joyful cries. But as soon as the king saw the headman he pushed others aside and came and embraced him.

"Uncle," said Bhadrashrenya, "prostrate yourself before the grandson of Maha Atharvan. He is our Master. He is the son of the lord of Bhrigus, Rishi Jamadagni. He has been merciful to us and has come here of himself. We will be saved now."

Vijaya stumbled forward and fell at the feet of Rama.

Rama extended his hands and said, "Yadava, may Agni, Varuna and Indra bless you."

Then Bhadrashrenya introduced Loma who was dressed like a boy, to Vijaya. "Uncle, this is Princess Loma, sister of Sudasa, the great king of the Tritsus."

The Yadavas, forgetting their miseries, celebrated the occasion with feast and merriment, for their king had brought with him the Guru for whom they had waited all these years.



## CHAPTER XLVI

### SWIFT JUSTICE

Rama and Loma slept in the hut near the one in which King Bhadrashrenya himself was spending the night.

Rama prepared the bed of deer-skin for Loma with his own hands. She was part of his life; she never liked him to go anywhere—even to ride horses or to use arms—without her joining him. They had been brought up together from his birth; they lived like two bodies with one soul; they could know each other's mind without speaking a word; and so far he had not learnt to look upon her as a woman.

Rama, however, knew that Arjuna had kidnapped Loma to make her a wife against her will. He, therefore, made it a point never to leave her. Even when she slept at night, he watched over her, ever ready to detect the foot-steps of a possible intruder.

Loma was older in years than Rama, but was delicate and small. Rama, for his age, was tall and well-grown and, whenever she felt tired, he would easily carry her in his arms.

During the voyage Rama had been a little surprised at finding that Loma had changed. For no reason, she would become shy and blush in his presence. Sometimes when he placed his hands on her, as he often did, she trembled a little. When she clung to Rama, he found that she was carried away by some inexplicable emotion. Before this change, Loma and he had always quarrelled like two children; now she did not quarrel and looked upon him with respect as if he was a big man. Rama knew that women were weak and concluded that all this was only an exhibition of feminine weakness.

In the early hours of the morning, both of them got up.

"Let us go and have a bath," said Rama.

"But do you know where the river is?" asked Loma.

"Prateep told me that the river is just near the settlement."

Both came out of the hut with earthen pots in their hands. The whole village was asleep and on every side were visible the signs of filth, stench and poverty.

At some distance they found a woman grinding corn and droning a cradle song at the same time.

"Mother, how far is the river from here?"

The old woman applied her hand to her forehead: "Where is the luck? You will have to go up the Girnar to find water. But, who are you, my son?"

"I am Bhargava."

Oh, oh! the son of Maha Atharvan!" she said. "My son, I wish you bring us the luck of ample water. Gomti is drying up. It takes half a day to collect a pot of water. And, who is this girl, my son?"

"She is Lomaharshini, the daughter of King Divo-dasa."

"My child, you are very beautiful. Come along, I will also join you with my pot."

As they went by the forest path up Mount Girnar, the old woman told them of the difficulties of the Yadava women; of Vijaya, the headman, who was a nice person; of Kukshivan, the wicked High-Priest; of the eldest queen of Bhadrashrenya, the mother of Prateep, and of the youngest queen, Revati, who was cunning and selfish.

When they went up the mount a little way they found that there was a stream rushing through some rocks in the bed of river Gomti. They washed their clothes and took their bath. And when, as was his wont, Rama stood

with his back to the river when Loma was taking bath, the old woman laughed uproariously. After bath Rama and Loma offered *arghya* to the rising sun.

As they were coming down the hill, they saw boys standing in a clump of trees and heard the sound of lashes being cruelly administered to some boy who was heard screaming.

Suddenly Rama became serious and his eyes glittered like live coals. "What is this?"

"It must be the doings of the wicked Madhu," said the old woman. "You know he is the favourite son of the youngest queen and the pupil of Kukshivan. He is a very wicked boy. Let us go away from here. If he sees us, he will harass us," she warned.

Disregarding the advice of the old woman, Rama proceeded straight towards the clump of trees, Loma and the old woman following him. They saw fifteen or twenty boys standing in a circle. Two of the boys were holding the hands of one boy whom Madhu was belabouring with a whip. The face of Madhu who was about twenty years of age, tall and strong, was aflame with cruel anger. The younger brother of the boy who was being whipped, was standing at a distance, crying convulsively. The rest of the boys were enjoying the fun.

"The boy who is being whipped is Kurma, the son of the headman. The boy who is crying is his brother Ujjayant," the old woman whispered to Rama.

"You rascal, you threw me off my horse when I was shouting at your father last evening. I will teach you a lesson," Madhu was heard shouting.

"Please forgive me, forgive me," said Kurma crying.

In reply Madhu flogged him once again. Kurma screaming with pain fell on the ground. The boys who were standing around laughed uproariously.

The face of Rama became set in grim determination. His brilliant eyes grew fierce like those of an angry tiger. Quietly, he handed over his pot of water to Loma, went into the crowd of boys and caught Madhu by the hand.

"Stop!" he shouted in a thunderous voice.

The boys were amazed. None of them had seen Rama before. Naturally, therefore, they were speechless when they saw this unknown boy catching hold of Madhu's hands, the irresponsible and ever-domineering prince before whom everyone trembled.

Kurma stopped screaming; Ujjayant forgot to cry. At first Madhu himself was taken aback. Then he became furious. He had never known anyone in the whole Yadava *gotra*, who would dare to stop him from doing what he liked, not even his father, the King. He had not seen Rama before, did not know that he had come and did not know who he was. He snatched his hand away and lashed out at Rama with his strap. Loma screamed in fright. The crowd of boys laughed uproariously at the courageous feat of their leader.

A streak of blood appeared on Rama's face where Madhu had hit him, but he was as cool as before; only flames appeared to rise from his flashing eyes. He sprang suddenly, caught Madhu by the throat and threw him on the ground. Madhu, as he was falling, caught hold of Rama, and both of them rolled on the ground.

The boys were lost in amazement. Kurma freed himself from his captors and Ujjayant stopped crying. Loma put her pot down on the ground and got the sling which was hanging by her side ready.

Madhu, who was very much older than Rama, rose from the ground and flung himself on Rama.

But Rama, cool and collected, was ready expecting the attack, his feet as nimble as an expert dancer's, his



every blow effective. He had life-long training under experts like Chayamana and Vimada, while Madhu, though much heavier of build, was no better than a crude beginner.

When Madhu was exhausted and out of breath, Rama was as fresh as ever. The crowd of boys were soon lost in admiration of the strength and skill of Rama. They had also a stealthy feeling of relief; after all, there was someone, they thought, who was more than a match for Madhu.

Ultimately Rama fastened a vice-like grip on Madhu who slipped and fell to the ground. Rama sat on his chest and continued to hit him with his fist till he became unconscious.

After Madhu fainted, Rama got up from his chest, took some water from Loma and washed the blood on Madhu's face and shook him into his senses.

"Come here, boy. Take this strap," Rama told Kurma.

Kurma came forward in fright and lifted the strap from the ground.

"How many lashes did he give you?" asked Rama.

"Five."

"Go on then. Give him five lashes."

"Five lashes?" asked Kurma dazed. How could he whip the king's son? The strap fell from his hand.

"Come along," Rama shouted his command. "Take up the strap. I am holding him. Go on. Lash out at him."

Kurma looked at the fearsome face of Rama and took the whip in his trembling hand.

"Go on. Lash him."

Kurma, trembling like a leaf, softly applied the strap to Madhu, who was still sitting on the ground half-dazed

and supported by Rama.

"Go on," said Rama. "One, two, three, four, five," he counted as he held down Madhu with his hands. Then he stood up. "Take back your strap," he told Madhu. "Every time you lash a young boy, you will be lashed in return. Get up."

Rama took hold of Madhu's hands and pulled him to his feet. "Go".

With great difficulty Madhu went away limping towards the forest. Some boys ran away towards the settlement.

The old woman's face was wreathed in smiles. "Live long, my son. After all, you brought Madhu to his senses."

Rama quietly washed his face and hands as if nothing had happened, untied his long hair, shook the dust off it and adjusted his deer skin around him.

## GOMTI PUNISHED

When Rama awoke from his sleep, he found all his limbs aching. He also saw that Loma, Bhadrashrenya and the Eldest Queen were anxiously looking at him.

"Gurudeva, how shall I expiate for Madhu's sin in hitting you?" asked Bhadrashrenya penitently.

"Please don't think of it," said Rama modestly. "It only gave me an opportunity to teach him *dharma*," he replied. "But who was his guru?"

"He has been with our *Purohit*, Kukshivan," said the King bitterly.

In the meantime, a retainer announced that Kukshi himself and Vijaya, the headman, had come to enquire about Rama's health. When they came into the hut, Rama accosted them with respect, though he could scarcely conceal his dislike of Kukshi.

"How is Kurma?" enquired Rama of Vijaya, the headman.

"He has high fever, but he is impatient to have your *darshan*," said the headman.

"Oh, I will just go and see him," said Rama, as he got up from his bed.

"No, No. Don't get up, Rama. Please lie down," Loma begged of him. "We have a festival tonight and you will be exhausted."

"What is wrong with me? Nothing," said Rama with a smile.

When he came out of the hut, he saw that a large number of young men and boys had collected there to pay him respects. As they folded their hands in salutation, mingled with fear, he smiled and blessed them all.

As he proceeded towards the hut of the headman, he could see the miserable condition of the people—dirty huts, old carts, torn clothes, slovenly, half-starved people. At one place he also saw some people talking excitedly.

"These people appear to be unhappy over something or the other," said Rama to the headman. "Why are they so? Do you know?"

"Who can be happy if there is no water to drink? Yesterday seven women quarrelled over a single pot of water," said the headman. "Now they all want to go to some better place."

"If the King had not arrived yesterday, we would have started for the banks of the Sabarmati. It is just as well that King Arjuna took away 300 horses and men from here. Otherwise there would have been no water left," said Kukshi almost maliciously.

Bhadrashrenya sighed. "My best boys and horses have been taken away to the war. I don't know when they will return."

Rama looked at Kukshi and asked: "Why don't you ask for the blessings of the Gods? Why do you leave these poor people in this unhappy condition?"

"The Gods themselves are angry with them," said Kukshi.

"Why? The Gods would certainly bless them if they followed *dharma*," said Rama decisively.

"Bhargava," said the king, "we have *adharma* as well as misery, both in plenty. All the time I have been absent either at Mahishmati or with the Great King in war. And I am very unlucky too. I have come back, but not after a victory, empty-handed. I have brought them neither wealth nor peace, not fame but disgrace."

Rama was silent for a moment. The Gods, he felt, were angry. No doubt of it. Here, he found miserable



men and women wandering from place to place with no lands to till and no water to drink; a guru, ignorant and conceited, who could not teach *dharma* to the people nor bring down the blessings of Gods upon them; a king who was always forced to remain away from them: dirt, ignorance, lack of refinement. These were the people whom his grandfather had cursed; possibly they were so wretched because of the curse. But now he had come to save them. He could lift the curse and bring the blessings of God to them. But how was he to do it?

In the evening when Rama and Loma arrived with the King and his family at the place where the festival was being held, preparations for making offerings to the sacrificial fire were afoot.

Soon after, the men, who had gone to the forest in search of Madhu, returned with him. Madhu's face was swollen; blood was over his body and his blood-shot eyes were full of malice.

When Bhadrashrenya saw his son, his face flushed with anger. "Vagabond, disgrace to the mighty Yadu's race. How dared you to lift your hand against Gurudeva? Prateep, tie his hands and feet. I will punish him," shouted the King.

Rama threw an affectionate glance at Madhu and softly remonstrated: "Lord of the Yadavas, you should not punish Madhu any more. Poor fellow, he did not know who I was. And we are quits. He whipped Kurma and I saw to it that Kurma whipped him. Justice has, therefore, already been meted out. Possibly he has not taken any food since morning. He needs food." Then he turned to Revati, the mother of Madhu. "Mother, please see that he gets food."

Madhu looked at Rama, his face dark with sullen anger. The boys of his *gotra*, who had been his slaves till

yesterday, were now laughing at him. The man who had beaten him and robbed him of his prestige was now their hero. Throwing a dark glance at Rama, he left the place with his mother.

After offerings were made to the sacrificial fire, there was feasting and heavy drinking. Men and women both got intoxicated. Some began to dance and sing and others to abuse each other. Even Bhadrashrenya, Kukshi and the headman were tipsy.

In the meantime, four or five people pushed their way through the crowd and came in front of Bhadrashrenya.

"We do not want to stay here," they began to shout insolently. "Our cows are dying; so are our horses. The headman says that there is ample water on the banks of Sabarmati. Let us go from here."

The King, who was a little muddled, tried to wave them away. "Come, come, we will talk about it tomorrow," he said.

The men would not be shaken off easily.

"We do not want to stay here. Let us move out of here," one man said.

"For two years now we have been near Girnar, but without any water," said another man.

"Seven cows died today without water," said the third.

"The Gods have been angry. What else would happen if evil men come in our midst?" they all shouted.

The headman tried to pacify these men. "We were going to start last night. Now that the King has come, we shall call the *panch* tomorrow and settle the matter," he said.

"Oh, no. We want to start straightway. Men of evil influence have come in our midst. We know that we

are doomed!" they shouted and a large crowd gathered round them.

Rama felt that these men were referring to his and Loma's arrival as inauspicious. He felt the justice of it. His arrival would be inauspicious, he felt, if the river Gomti dried up no sooner he came. He looked at the King who was now sober and appeared to sense the sinister significance of the demand.

"We will settle these things tomorrow," said the King.

"No, no," the men began to shout. "We will yoke our bullocks straightway. It is a moonlit night. The Gods have been angry as evil men have come in our midst."

"But the High-Priest is against our going," said the headman.

Kukshi smiled: "I was against it yesterday, but today as I was performing the sacrifice, I saw an ominous sign." He looked at Rama with ill-concealed malice and continued: "Tomorrow the stream will dry up. There is going to be fierce heat. There is no way but to leave this place."

Suddenly Queen Revati, mother of Madhu, rushed in excitedly. "You said that we have been released from our curse, but you have brought two persons of ill-omen and a curse has descended upon us. My son is on his death-bed and Gomti is dried up," she cried.

"Gomti dried up!" exclaimed several people all at once.

"Yes, two women who had gone there to fetch water came away without any."

The persons standing there began to shout.

"Didn't we tell you that the Gods were angry with us?"

"There is no way except to leave this place."

"Come along."

"Let us start; let us start."

Revati stood in front of the King with her hands on her hips. "Whoever wants to stay here may stay. I and my Madhu are leaving this place," she said.

Bhadrashrenya rose from his seat. "Whoever wants to go, can go," he said frowning. "Sage Kukshivan, you may go if you like. Revati, you also might go. I will not leave this place. If necessary, I shall stay in the fort on the hill."

Rama, who was standing with Loma at a distance, was strangely moved. He knew that Arjuna had told Bhadrashrenya not to leave this place and that, if he left it, the wicked Lord of the Haihayas was not likely to spare the Yadavas. This sudden desire to leave on the part of Kukshi, therefore, was to destroy the authority of Bhadrashrenya.

A tornado swept over him. All this—misery, squabbles, calamity—was due to him. He himself had decided to come here, and yet God Varuna was angry with the Yadavas and had deprived them of water. Now, Bhadrashrenya, who believed in him implicitly, was faced with a dire calamity: not only had Arjuna deprived him of all authority and prestige, but his people themselves had risen in open defiance.

Rama sensed the situation. No one had expected the King so suddenly. In his absence, Kukshi, who had in Madhu and his mother Revati convenient tools, had been all-powerful in the *gotra*. Now that the King had brought him as the Guru and Madhu's prestige had been broken, Kukshi was determined to destroy the *gotra*. If the King left this place as he was being asked to do, Arjuna was sure to destroy the Yadavas.

Rama put the question to himself. Had he come to make the Yadavas miserable? What was the use of his coming if he could not save them? As this thought flashed in his mind, every nerve in his body quivered with concentrated fury. He was the heir to the greatness of the mighty sages, Bhrigu, Shukra and Chyavana; of the power of Maha Atharvan, of the saintliness and learning of Jamadagni. And yet God Varuna remained implacable, and Gomti had dried up even as he came here. He would not tolerate this.

A sudden change came over him, Loma could easily see. He became mysteriously aloof and an awesome loneliness enveloped him. She had never seen him turn into such a fearful person ever before.

"Loma, come," he said catching hold of Loma's hand.

The King heard him and said: "Where are you going, Bhargava? Forgive me. I am being defied by my people. I feel insulted. But what can I do?" said Bhadrashrenya helplessly.

"I am going to punish Gomti," said Rama with an authoritative voice. The people who heard his words laughed derisively.

Rama stepped before them. The laughter vanished as they saw his flashing eyes and heard his firm determination: "I am going to Gomti. I am going to punish her."

Taking Loma by the hand, Rama walked away towards Girnar. The magic of his presence was gone and some people began to laugh again. "Oh, he will punish Gomti and she will give him water!" And they left the crowd to prepare for the journey.

Wrapt in concentrated anger, Rama climbed the mountain. His face was set in grim immobility. His eyes alone burnt like live coals. Only one thing was before his mind: "Gomti had lapsed from *dharma*. She



must be punished."

The concentrated fury had taken such possession of him that he did not even cast a glance at Loma who was accompanying him nor at Prateep, Kurma and the other boys who were following him at a distance.

As he reached the top of Girnar, the sun rose in a cloudless sky. Kukshi was right. It was going to be a terrible day. There was no breeze. The trees were motionless. Even the birds did not stir. A fierce sun was soon going to scorch the waterless tract.

Rama reached the top of the Mount Girnar where the temple of Pashupati-Somnath was situate. Grimly he set about clearing the place in front of it. Loma, sensing his intention, collected the dried branches of trees for the sacrificial fire.

Silently Rama began to prepare for a *yajna*. He knew that it was through *yajna* alone that his ancestors could converse with the Gods and obtain their blessings. But he was scarcely conscious of what he was doing. He moved about as if in sleep. Only one dread resolve had taken possession of him. He would invoke the God of Fire, the guardian God of Maha Atharvan, and get Him to send down water for the Yadavas.

As he started the *yajna*, Bhadrashrenya, his Eldest Queen and others, who had come in search of him, reached the spot. They stood awe-struck at a distance. He performed the *yajna* with meticulous regard for rituals. He invoked the God of Fire, gave Him the final offering. Then his voice, resounding with passion, pronounced the curse:

"Gomti, I, the grandson of Maha Atharvan, son of Jamadagni, I curse thee. Thou hast deprived my Yadavas of water. I therefore curse thee. Thou hast left them athirst, and I curse thee. My curse shall fall upon thee.

Thy bed shall always remain dry and stony. On thy banks shall grow wild thorns. The wrath of the Gods and the Rishis—of Bhrigu, Ushanas and Chyavana—shall descend upon thee. Thou shalt no more sanctify men. I, Rama, Jamadagni's son, I curse thee, Gomti."

Speaking as if in a dream, he walked to the edge of a precipice and began to pray to Varuna: "Varuna, Lord of Gods, come and save thy Yadavas. Greatest of the great, Thou, who knowest the path of the birds, come. I, Rama, the son of Jamadagni, invite Thee, Lord. I want Thee."

The people who had come there watched this solitary young figure, enveloped in fierce majesty, standing against the sky, inviting Varuna hour after hour in passionate prayer. As the afternoon turned into evening and the sun was on the point of setting, a black cloud arose from the western horizon which was seen lit up by a flash of lightning.

A fear entered the hearts of the Yadavas as they stood there watching Rama. With folded hands and head bowed they began to pray with the Bhargava. One cloud after another floated in the sky; lightning flashed on all sides. Winds began to blow. Rama continued to utter *mantras* in a prayerful voice.

Suddenly darkness descended upon them. The wind shook the trees. Thunder echoed in the caves of Girnar. And there stood Rama, as if surrounded by lightning.

The rain came—in torrents.

Suddenly, there was a blinding flash which lighted up the sky. The Yadavas saw the solitary figure standing on the edge of the precipice as if commanding the elements, his hair wildly flying in the wind. Then fell the lightning, cleaving one of the peaks of Girnar. A clap of thunder followed. The three worlds trembled.

And from where the peak had been shattered, sprang forward a hard and mighty stream seeking a new bed.

Disregarding the fury of the elements, the Yadavas rushed down the hill to take their cattle to some shelter.

## THE FIELD OF THE NAGAS

Two years went by.

The Yadavas were now happily settled on the bank of the new river Rama Gomti, which Rama had made to flow on the night of the miracles.

On the bank of the river which flowed with water all the year round, Rama had founded an *ashram* of Bhṛigu, a little away from the settlement. Young though he was, he had begun to collect young and promising Yadavas as disciples, teaching them Vedic learning. He also trained them in the use of arms and the rearing of horses, arts of which he was a master, brought up as he was by such a valiant old warrior as Kavi Chayamana.

The news that Rama had worked a miracle in punishing the old river Gomti and bringing down water in the new river Rama Gomti, had travelled fast. The growing prosperity of the Yadavas which had followed the foundation of the new settlement had also attracted the attention of the surrounding tribes. Many persons had, therefore, come and settled with the Yadava *Gotra*. People, from time to time, travelled long distances to pay their respects to the young Gurudeva, Bhārgava. Sons of leading tribesmen in other parts of Saurashtra were also sent to the *ashram* for education.

The news went round the western coast that Rama, the son of the great sage Jamadagni, the Lord of Bhṛigus, had permanently settled on the bank of the new river. Some Bhṛigu families, who had fled to distant villages for fear of persecution at the hands of Arjuna and his ancestors hearing the news summoned up courage to come and live with the Yadava *Gotra*. They worshipped the very

ground which the feet of the Lord of Bhri-gus trod and their sons were his loyal hereditary disciples.

Though only seventeen years old, Rama had developed wonderful power of organization and a rare capacity for getting things done his way. Soon the Yadava settlement was a group of happy villages with whom his word was law and his young disciples began to grow adepts in the arts of peace as well as war.

In the most natural way possible, Rama had begun to regulate the conduct of the Yadavas, teaching them the ways of *dharma*. Old King Bhadrashrenya was now very happy. He saw with joy that his young Gurudeva was transforming his demoralised people into a heroic and well-disciplined tribe.

The women of the tribe were, however, more intractable than the men. They lacked refinement. In spite of the efforts of Loma and the eldest queen, they would not change their habits. They quarrelled with their menfolk, neglected their children, kept their homes squalid, and some of them shamelessly carried on with neighbours or ran away with strangers. Loma, the born princess, with her exquisite refinement, was most unhappy at the way these women behaved. Very often she was in despair when she found that they resisted all her efforts to improve them.

Once she unburdened herself to Rama, with tears in her eyes. "Bhargava, what can I do with these women?" She had slowly got out of the habit of addressing him as 'Rama' and now used the respectful patronymic 'Bhargava.' "It is impossible to change these women. They only spend their days in shouting at their men and beating their children. On the slightest pretext they pull each other by the hair."

Rama listened to her with a soft smile, but without a



word in reply. "All the day round, they cannot keep their husbands. That is half the trouble," continued Loma. "Poor things! They do not know how to merge themselves into their husbands," said Rama. Loma blushed. She knew that she had completely merged herself in Rama, but unfortunately he did not know anything about it. "I must teach them how to do it," he added.

A few days later, the whole Yadava *Gotra* was agitated over a scandal. Soma, the wife of a leading Yadava, had left her husband and children and gone to live with Ruru, another leading Yadava. There was a quarrel between the husband and Ruru, resulting in an affray. As both men were influential, Vijaya, the headman, intervened in the dispute, but even the *panch* of the *Gotra* were divided in their loyalty, both parties being well-connected. The whole tribe was, therefore, split into two. Even King Bhadrashrenya was helpless.

When the affair came to the ears of Rama, his majestic face acquired alabaster immobility. At midnight, he called Prateep, who was now his loyal disciple and chief, to collect twenty-five trained disciples. Then he proceeded with them to Ruru's house, surrounded it and set fire to it.

Suddenly awakened from their sleep by the fire, Ruru and Soma rushed out of the house, without any clothes on their bodies. Rama and his disciples caught them both, brought them to the *ashram* and tied them each to a separate tree, a little away from the other.

Next day, excitement seized the whole *Gotra*. Most men and women heartily liked the punishment that had been inflicted upon the two lovers. People began to flock to the *ashram* to see them tied to separate trees opposite each other, exposed to everyone's gibes and jeers.

Some Yadavas, who were friendly to Ruru, were very angry, and approached the High-Priest, Kukshivan, to

intervene, but with Rama worshipped by the whole *Gotra* and Prateep standing guard over the two lovers, nobody had the courage to do anything in the matter.

For six long days and nights, Ruru and Soma were tied to the trees, only given water to drink. On the seventh day, Rama released Soma, purified her by propitiatory rites and restored her, famished and utterly humiliated, to her husband.

Ruru was now the butt of ridicule for the whole *Gotra*. For six days, he had been exposed to the jeers and comments of the *Gotra* and compelled to look helplessly on at Soma tied to the opposite tree. While tied to the tree, he had seen Rama purifying Soma and handing her over to her husband. His mortification knew no bounds.

On the eighth day, Rama released Ruru. "Leave my presence at once," he told Ruru sternly. "I will let you go alive this time. Next time I find you running away with another's wife, I will not let you go. Whoever breaks a home, has to be broken."

This incident enveloped Rama in an atmosphere of awesome reverence. His word was now irresistible. His approval or disapproval became the standard which shaped the conduct of the Yadavas.

The *ashram* of the Bhrigus now became a powerful factor in the life of the Yadavas. Its leaders, Rama and his four inseparable companions—Loma always dressed in men's garb, Prateep, the King's son and Kurma and Ujjayant, the sons of the headman—came to be generally referred to as the "Five."

Once the "Five" were returning from the forest, when they saw some Nagas cutting trees, with a supervisor standing near them with lash in hand lest they might escape. The Nagas were the slaves of the Yadavas. They were dark-skinned, ignorant, dwarfish, and savages in

comparison with the Dasyus of Aryavarta. All the hard work in the Yadava families was done by them. They were bought and sold like cattle, whipped on the slightest pretext, and often killed for no fault of theirs. Their womenfolk were worse than slaves, for they were at the mercy of the Yadava men whenever they took fancy to anyone of them.

Rama saw that most of the Nagas he saw working were old. He therefore got down from his horse and approached the Nagas. One Naga, emaciated, old midget of a man, looked at him with frightened eyes, expecting some punishment and looking round for some way to escape. The supervisor kept his whip ready in hand lest the Naga might try to escape.

"Supervisor, will you stand aside?" said Rama.

"Gurudeva, this Naga is very wicked," said the supervisor.

"I am not afraid. Why are you afraid?" asked Rama, as he approached the Naga.

The Naga, trembling in every limb, fell at the feet of Rama for no reason, begging for mercy. His eyes were like those of a frightened deer, possibly he expected to be killed the next minute. Rama bent down, affectionately lifted the Naga from the ground, and asked: "Where do you live?"

"Gurudeva," replied the supervisor, "he does not understand our language. He lives in the field of the Nagas nearby."

"Yes, I have heard a lot of stories about how they live. I want to see how they do. Take me to the field," said Rama.

The supervisor was surprised. He could never imagine that so great and holy a personage as the Gurudeva would ever consent to go to the field where the Nagas

lived and which everybody shunned like hell.

"Yes, Lord," said the supervisor. And drawing his end of the ropes tied to the Nagas, he began to carry them to the field as if they were cattle. The "Five" followed the supervisor.

"Prateep, you keep these Nagas like cattle, whereas in Aryavarta the Dasyus live in palaces," said Loma.

"They are like cattle," said Prateep.

"No. They are the children of Manu," said Rama, "just as we are."

"How can you call them the sons of Manu?" asked Prateep in surprise.

"Whoever can pronounce the *mantras* is the child of Manu," Rama said decisively.

"These people can never pronounce the *mantras*," said Prateep.

"I will get them do it," said Rama.

They went through a forest and came to a field surrounded by a high hedge of thorns. Three Yadava watchmen stood there, sword and whip in hand.

"Gurudeva, this is the field of Kukshivan. We cannot enter it without his permission," said Kurma.

Lightning flashed in Rama's eyes. "He is a Bhrigu. I am his *Kulapati*, the head of his family," he said with authority.

Kurma felt that the air was charged with some unexpected shock. He saw that Rama's face had become immobile and his eyes were two concentrated points of fire.

"Untie these Nagas and take the cords away," Rama ordered.

"As the Lord pleases," said the supervisor.

The Nagas, freed from the ropes, looked at Rama as if they were dazed. They had never seen any other Yadava come near them except the supervisor and the

watchmen and now these god-like persons were standing before them, without sword or lash, each leading his horse. For a moment, they felt suspicious, but their suspicion was dispelled when they saw Rama smiling at them affectionately. In a sudden impulse they fell at his feet. Rama placed his hand on the shoulder of one of the Nagas.

Rama then got the gate to the field opened and entered it accompanied by Loma. Prateep, Kurma, and Ujjayant shuddered as they entered the field.

Loma went towards a few Naga women who were sitting under a tree in the field and wailing piteously. As she approached, she saw what was lying in front of them and screamed in fright.

In one stride Rama reached the spot. Loma was trembling in every limb. Before the wailing women lay a fifteen or seventeen-year-old girl, stark naked, in a pool of blood—the victim of some brutal rape. When they saw the girl in this condition, the Nagas also began to wail.

"This must be the work of one of the watchmen," said Prateep. He knew very well that the watchmen never spared a Naga girl. It was usual with them.

"Come here," thundered Rama, "Is this your doing?"

The watchmen never thought that they had done anything unusual. "She was rather an obstinate girl," one of them said.

Quietly, firmly, but with eyes aflame, Rama approached the speaker. "Ujjayant, see that none of the watchmen runs away," he said. Saying this, he snatched the whip from the hand of the watchman and began to lay it on his back. The watchman shrieked in pain, but Rama went on whipping him till he fainted, blood streaming from his body. The other watchman fell at Rama's feet, the third one ran away. Rama whipped the second watch-



man till he also lay unconscious in his own blood. Then he threw away the whip.

"Loma, invoke the Aswins. Clean this girl and pray to the Gods to cure her." Loma handed over her arms to Rama, lifted the girl and cleaned her.

The Yadava *Gotra* was stunned to see the procession as it came through the village. Rama was carrying a blood-spattered Naga girl in his hands. Princess Loma followed him, surrounded by the Naga women. Then followed Prateep, Kurma and Ujjayant, furtively looking at their people. And they all went through the streets, giving a shock to everyone, for no Naga could walk through the main streets of the Yadava *Gotra*. To do so was a sacrilege. All of them then proceeded to the *ashram* of Bhṛigu.

The whole village was in wild excitement. Rama had forcibly entered the field of Kukshivan's Nagas and beaten his watchmen. And he brought the Nagas in the main streets of the village!

Kukshivan was angry beyond words. He collected the *panch* and complained of this unheard-of sacrilege committed by Rama, by leading the Nagas through the streets. He threatened them with the wrath of the Gods if they did not take prompt steps to purge this sin.

Most of the leading Yadavas had Naga slaves which each of them kept in his own field. They caught the Nagas in the jungles, kept them as slaves, bought and sold them; in a way they were their wealth. But now if even the field of Kukshivan could be looted, who would be spared?

Rama was not in the least worried about this excitement. When he went to his *ashram*, he saw that, out of about hundred disciples living with him, all but seven had fled. Even these seven young men were standing at a dis-

tance, eyeing him with distrust. He turned to Prateep.

"Prateep, evidently you do not approve of what I am doing. What is my *dharma* is not seen by you as yours. You can go back to your palace."

"Gurudeva," Prateep started protesting.

"Prateep, you do not feel that this Naga is the son of Manu. I think he is. I could see that Ujjayant allowed the watchman to run away. You have no faith in what I consider *dharma*."

None of them moved from where they were standing.

"Go away," he told his companions and wrapped himself in a mantle of silence.

Prateep, Kurma and Ujjayant felt small, but they had no faith in what Rama was doing. Slowly, with dragging feet, they left the *ashram*.

## THE NEW ASHRAM

When Rama saw Loma crying by herself, he went to her and placed his hand on her shoulder with tender affection. Loma clung to him desperately.

"Rama, I do not want to stay here. I want to go back to Sapta Sindhu. These people are like demons. I cannot live amongst them," she said and cried aloud.

"Loma, you are very tired," said Rama.

"Yes, yes. Your heart is like a stone. You don't care for Maharshi and you never think of Amba. You don't even care for Vriddha," she said sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Loma, I never forget them. When I light the sacrificial fire, I see the lord of the Bhrigus. When I look after the horses, I see Vriddha before me. And when I see you, I see Amba herself."

For several months now, Loma had given up her old habit of hitting Rama in fond exasperation. But she could not restrain herself any longer. She went on sobbing and hitting him with both her hands.

"Amba! You look upon me as your mother! Are you a man or a beast, or a stone?" she asked.

Rama took Loma in his arms. "Yes, hit me. Hit me hard, that will relieve you," he said as if he was indulgently putting up with the petulance of a child. That made Loma angrier.

"I don't want to stay here. I want to go to Aryavarta," repeated Loma.

"I will ask King Bhadrashrenya to send you back," Rama said.

"And—and—you will stay here without me? Are

you not ashamed to say so? And what shall I do if I go back alone?" asked Loma.

"Loma, what will happen to my disciples who have fallen from *dharma*, if I go away?" Rama asked her in return, quite seriously.

"You are mad. These people will never follow *dharma*," said Loma.

"Then it is the fault of the guru. If the guru teaches *dharma* rightly, the disciples are sure to follow it," said Rama.

"These people are never going to accept you as their guru. Go away," said Loma pushing Rama away in exasperation.

"I am not their guru, because they have accepted me as such. I am their guru born; they are my people, whether they accept me or not. I have come here of my own accord. Now Loma, please go to bed. In the morning we are going to give up this *ashram*," said Rama.

"Why?" asked Loma.

"Now we are only three left. You, I and the old woman Reva. Tomorrow we shall go to the Field of the Nagas and make our *ashram* there," answered Rama firmly.

In the mansion of Bhadrashrenya, the King, Vijaya, the headman, and Kukshivan, the High-Priest, were taking counsel among themselves, when Prateep, Kurma and the *panchas* arrived.

"Today Rama brought the Nagas into the village. Tomorrow he will bring them to our *yajnashtalas*," Kukshivan said with a conceited bitterness. "The day after, he will make them recite the sacred *mantras*. On the fourth, he will sanction the marriage of our daughters to them."

"Bhargava says that whoever can recite the sacred *mantras* is the son of Manu, and these Nagas certainly

can recite them," said Kurma.

"What nonsense!" exploded Kukshivan. "How can a Naga be the son of Manu, the equal of an Arya?"

"An Arya is an Arya, a Naga is a Naga. What does it matter if a few Naga men and women die?" asked one of the *panchas*.

"Gurudeva says that in Sapta Sindhu, the great Sage Vishwamitra made the Dasyus Aryas by the strength of his Gayatri," said Kurma.

"But the great Master of Silence does not accept the heresy. And Vasishtha is the Sage among the sages," said Kukshivan. "These Nagas are worse than cattle. This has been the teaching of Sage Mrikund."

"We must go and explain the matter to Bhargava," said the headman.

"Bhargava will not listen to us," said Kurma.

"It is the King's business to make Bhargava see our point," said Kukshivan. "He is the King's darling."

Bhadrashrenya was irritated at these sarcastic remarks. "Yes, Gurudeva is dear to me," he said pugnaciously. "I worship him. If the Yadavas had any sense of gratitude, they would worship him too. Why are you so upset at the Nagas coming into our settlement? I have seen Dasyus ride on horseback in the streets of Tritsugram in Sapta Sindhu. I have seen them...but for the moment, let us... We shall talk about these matters tomorrow," he ended abruptly.

As Kurma proceeded homewards, he could not help feeling that something had gone wrong. Being a shrewd young man, he knew how, because of Rama, his Yadavas had prospered, acquired cattle and horses and gained prestige, and how their young men had become strong and disciplined. He shuddered at the prospect of Rama leaving them. "If he left, the Yadavas will fall to pieces.



Then when Sahasrarjuna returns from the war and wreaks his vengeance on us, we would be helpless, unable to resist. Destruction of the clan would then follow. Prateep and Ujjayant are fools. If Gurudeva left us, we would become the slaves of Kukshivan. Never, never," Kurma muttered to himself.

Kurma took up his weapons again and started for the *ashram*. When he reached there, he found it deserted. He shouted for Rama, but there was no response. Ultimately he found the favourite horse of Rama tied in the stable.

"Where is Gurudeva?" he asked the horse. The horse neighed meaningfully. Kurma, thereupon untied him and let him go wherever he would.

The horse led Kurma to the Field of the Nagas where he saw it enveloped in fire which Rama, looking like the God of Fire, was stoking, bamboo in hand. The Nagas were standing all around in a happy mood, their children dancing. A little away, Loma and the old woman, Reva, were sitting surrounded by Naga women, looking on.

When Kurma approached Rama, he felt as if he was in the presence of the Great Pasupati. He fell at his feet. "Gurudeva, Bhargava, forgive me."

Kurma was overjoyed when, without a word of rebuke, Rama lifted him from the ground and embraced him. He knew that his place in Gurudeva's heart was secure.

When Prateep went to the mansion in which he lived, his wife, Princess Vishakha, who was the daughter of the King of Anarta, was on the point of starting for the *ashram* to join him at night.

"Why do you come here at this time of the day?" she said.

"Bhargava asked me to leave the *ashram*," Prateep replied.

"Why?" asked Vishakha.

"He will not accept me as his disciple," said Prateep.

"I knew very well from the beginning that you would do something or the other to displease him," said Vishakha bitterly.

"No," replied Prateep. "I left Bhargava because he brought the Nagas from the field and polluted our settlement."

Vishakha was wroth. "Your Yadavas are beasts; you don't feel for the poor Nagini who was brutally raped. I am glad that Bhargava punished your sinners properly."

She went and stood before her husband defiantly. "You sided with your Yadavas, did you? And against Gurudeva? You were not ashamed of doing so? Yes, I am glad that he drove you out of the *ashram*. What is the use of having a half-hearted disciple like you?" Vishakha sneered.

"Bhargava brought the Nagas to our village. Our people are excited. No one could suffer such a sacrilege in silence," Prateep tried to stem the flood of his wife's anger.

"Of course, you cannot suffer it," Vishakha jeered. "I saw the condition of the poor girl whom Bhargava brought here. What would you say if your sisters and daughters were treated in the same way?" she said contemptuously preparing the bed of the unhappy husband all the time. "And what will you do now?" she asked Prateep.

Vishakha went on grumbling: "I have never seen a man like you who does not know his own interest. Who taught you to be a great fighter? Who helped you to accomplish the valorous deeds that the whole world is talking about? Where would you have been these years, had he not treated you like his brother? And you, you!"

the wife looked at her husband with contempt, "you were the first to leave him. Surely some people know well how to cut their own throats."

Every word of Vishakha pierced the heart of Prateep, making him feel very small.

Vishakha, however, continued: "You were nobody in the *gotra* when Madhu, the favourite of Kukshivan, lorded over it. Now when Gurudeva leaves us, Madhu will return from his maternal grandfather's house and you will sink into a nobody again."

Prateep felt like crying. "Vishakha, I am an ass. I am not fit to be the disciple of Bhargava."

"I know that very well," said the Princess of Anarta. "You are fit to be the disciple of Kukshi only—like Madhu."

Prateep was exasperated. "I will not leave Gurudeva," he said.

"Then, what are you waiting here for? Go back to him," Vishakha said more aggressively than ever.

Prateep left the royal hut and went to the *ashram* hurriedly. There was no one there. But he could see from a precipice that the Field of the Nagas was burning and that people were dancing around it in joy.

Prateep, feeling broken-hearted, returned to his father's residence and informed him of what had happened to the Field of the Nagas.

"Prateep, we are very unfortunate," sighed Bhadrashrenya.

"Will he go away? Won't he come back?" asked Prateep anxiously.

"My son, Gurudeva will not go. He is noble. He has taken me to his heart and he will not leave me. But the Yadavas do not deserve their good fortune. Whatever they have, has come to us through Bhargava. When we

were dying for water, he gave it to us. When Sahasrarjuna has been trying to render me powerless, he has created power for us, and now when he returns from the war, we have no one but Gurudeva to help us to fight him."

Prateep left his father and went towards the Field of the Nagas.

## CHAPTER L

### KUKSHI'S WIFE

Vishakha was very proud of the *gotra* of her father, the King of Anarta, and held her husband's *gotra* in contempt. Her great friend, Kalvini, the wife of the High-Priest Kukshi, also held the same opinion about the Yadavas. But the one subject which the two friends always loved to discuss was Rama.

Every evening, Vishakha came to the *ashram* to live with her husband. With her aggressive nature, she had, to some extent, taken charge of its life. Every morning, therefore, when she went to the river for her bath, Kalvini never failed to join her, anxious to hear all about the *ashram*.

Because of the relations between Kukshi and Rama, Kalvini had never visited the *ashram*. But she never missed a single occasion to be present when she could look at his handsome face and sinewy figure. He had made a deep impression upon her and she loved to hear all about him with avid interest. The two great friends agreed on most points about Rama, but on one point, they completely disagreed. Vishakha maintained that Rama and Loma were like brother and sister; Kalvini was sure that they lived like husband and wife.

This morning, when Vishakha went to the river as usual, she could not restrain from venting her righteous indignation against Kukshi for his treatment of Rama. On this point also, Kalvini agreed with her. Just emerging into her twenties and bursting with youth and joy, she had very little respect for her middle-aged husband and enjoyed the prospect of his being taught a lesson by Rama. She, therefore, immediately approved his action



in bringing the Nagas to the village.

When these two friends were talking on the river-side about this all-absorbing topic, other women of the *gotra* came there to take their bath and fetch water. Most of them had been shocked at the way in which the poor Naga girl had been treated by the Yadava watchmen. The women had little respect for their husbands' fidelity and they were in no manner displeased at the way in which Rama was exposing them to shame. He had earned their esteem when he punished Soma and Ruru and they cheerfully joined Vishakha and Kalvini in the enthusiastic approbation of what he had been doing.

In the meantime, some women who had just come for their bath to the river, informed them that Rama had burnt down the Field of the Nagas and that he was going to start an *ashram* there. Vishakha who was anxious to know whether her husband had been received by Rama in the *ashram* or not, proposed: "We must all go for the *darshan* of Bhargava."

"Oh, yes. We must go and have the *darshan* of Bhargava," chimed in Kalvini eagerly. She never missed an occasion to have a good look at him.

Most of the women agreed to this suggestion, and with the pots full of water on their head, they took their way to the Field of the Nagas instead of returning home.

The sun had risen and the thorny hedge of the Field of the Nagas had been reduced to ashes, when these women reached the Field. On reaching there, they saw a group of Nagas, with Rama, Loma, Kurma and Prateep with them, wailing loudly. When the Nagas saw the Yadava women coming their way, they made way for them. In the middle they had just prepared a funeral pyre on which Rama had laid the dead body of the Naga girl who had been raped. His face bore the protective expression of

an elder brother, his eyes were soft and moist. With tender care he adjusted the head of the Naga girl on a piece of wood and around her pale face he adjusted her hair almost affectionately.

The Yadava women saw the small, emaciated body of the Naga girl and their eyes were full of tears. Some of them could not resist crying aloud. They all placed their pots a little away and stood near the funeral pyre, when Rama consigned the Naga girl to flames with the ritual proper to an Arya. All eyes were full of tears except his, which continued to pay to the poor, dead girl the tribute of tender affection.

With morning, excitement again seized the Yadava *gotra*. News travelled from mouth to mouth, from hut to hut. Rama had left them. So had all the Nagas. At night Rama aided by Prateep and Kurma had burnt down the Field of the Nagas. The women of the leading Yadavas, who had gone to the river for their bath, had not returned home.

When Kukshivan found that his wife had not yet returned from the river, he began to invoke the curse of the Gods upon her for her sloth. No one exactly understood what had happened.

However, when the day advanced, Bhadrashrenya and the other leading Yadavas learnt about what was happening at the Field of the Nagas and went there. They saw the Yadava boys, under the leadership of Prateep, removing the cinders and ashes which surrounded the Field. The Nagas and their wives were sweeping the Field. In the centre Loma, Kurma, Vishakha and Kalvini were making preparations for *yajna*. And people who heard of these strange happenings were slowly collecting all around.

"Where is Bhargava?" asked the king.

"He has gone to Gomti for consigning the ashes of

the Naga girl," replied Kurma: It was shocking news to some. The river had been polluted!

"What are you all doing here?" asked the headman.

"Bhargava has decided to found a new *ashram* here," said Kurma.

When Bhargava returned, Bhadrashrenya asked him to come back to the old *ashram*.

Rama refused. "No. I will live only where *dharma* rules. You lost faith in your guru, also in what was *dharma* to me. Whoever has faith in me only will come to meet me here."

"Gurudeva, then I will be the first to stay here," said Bhadrashrenya.

"Then remember one thing," said Rama firmly. "Whoever shall harass a Naga here shall die."

## THE EMBASSY OF THE SHARYATAS

A new and more spacious *ashram* rose on what was once the hated Field of the Nagas.

In this new *ashram*, Rama trained a hundred Yadava young men in the art of war and the rearing and training of horses. Prateep, who now lived there, was his lieutenant. Vishakha looked after the *ashram*. Kurma and Ujjayant, the sons of the headman, managed all other affairs.

The Nagas belonging to the *ashram* lived in a separate enclave, working for it and mixing freely with the Yadavas. As a result, this new community of the Nagas shed the terror-complex which was so common to the other Nagas. Whenever any Naga, even outside the *ashram*, was in fear of death, he found an asylum there; and even some Nagas belonging to the adjoining Sharyata tribe ran away from their masters to seek safety under the protection of Rama.

In a few months' time the Nagas began to develop a new status which made it difficult for the Yadavas to treat them as before or extract work with the aid of the whip and the lash; and the status of the Nagas of the Yadava *Gotra* also began to affect the status of the Nagas who served other Aryan tribes like the Sharyata tribe.

However, the elders of the Yadava *Gotra*, who looked upon the Nagas as their beasts of burden, became dissatisfied, though they did not venture to express their feelings. This dissatisfaction was aggravated because the Nagas did not do as much work as before. This led to a curious result. More and more Nagas were in demand for serving the growing community. The demand, however, could not

be easily satisfied. Fresh recruits were difficult to be secured for that involved hunting for them in the deep recesses of the forests where they lived. This drove some of the enterprising Yadavas to organise expeditions for capturing the Nagas in the forests frequently. Such expeditions came in conflict with the similar ones led by the Sharyatas from their adjoining territory. These led to severe conflicts between the two tribes, resulting in tension.

Rama, apparently indifferent to these developments, pursued his course of rescuing the Nagas with energy and thoroughness.

Rama was no longer a boy. Tall and sinewy, fair like the God Surya himself, he was worshipped by everyone who had thrown his lot with him. But none loved him more intensely than Loma. Often she dreamt of returning to her homeland, Aryavarta, and being among her own cultured people again; sometimes, overwhelmed by loneliness, she even shed tears. But she could not think of leaving Rama, who was the one joy of her life. She lived in and for him. She was by his side in the *yajñashala*—the hall of the sacrificial fire—as often as in the *asvashala* where the horses were trained.

Loma's attitude towards Rama had now completely changed. She could not look upon him as an inseparable friend, a part of herself, as she used to do before. She was now a lover wanting to be one with him and secret sorrow gnawed at her heart. She knew that Rama also treated her as a part of himself and fulfilled her slightest wish, but so far he had not come to look upon her as his beloved.

Loma had a great friend in Vishakha, though she heartily disliked her friend Kalvini, the young wife—and the fourth one — of the middle-aged Kukshi, the High-Priest. She met Kalvini every day when, with Vishakha,



she went to the river bank to take her bath and fetch water; for Kalvini never came to the *ashram* as her husband hated Rama and did not openly like to keep any contact with the *ashram*.

Loma found that Kalvini was an officious woman whose main purpose in life was to win hearts by smile or glance. Loma knew that she never missed a single occasion to be present when Rama went to see the King or visited any one of the elders nor did she talk with her on any subject other than Rama. She, therefore, had begun to look upon this plump, soft, voluptuous pussy-cat of a woman with deep mistrust.

As the disciples grew in number, Rama divided them into 'Satakas' or 'Hundreds.' Each 'Hundred' was trained as a compact group, the members of which lived, moved and had their being as a single unit.

Rama was strongly attached to his disciples. He looked after them with great solicitude. He spared no pains to train them, but he would suffer no breach of duty and had no mercy for the dilettante, the idler, the rogue or the grumbler. One day, when one of the disciples began to grumble, he lifted him off the ground and threw him down a precipice.

Though the disciples were trained rigorously, none of them could come up to Rama either in strength or skill, or the use of arms and horses. No one had the absolute fearlessness which he alone possessed. Above all, he released mysterious streams of faith which bound everyone who came near him by unwavering loyalty.

Instinctively, Rama wanted his disciples, his horse and his weapon to be the most effective.

Out of the ordinary axe, he evolved his favourite weapon, the battle-axe 'Parashu.' It was no longer an instrument to fell the tree or hit on the head. With its

sharp, thin blade and strong handle, it became a terrific weapon of destruction which could be wielded on foot or on horse-back.

Within a few years, Rama's 'Satakas' were valiant groups of young men who rode powerful horses, each with a battle-axe of his own. And at the head of them was found Rama with his majestic face and commanding presence, and his *Parashu*, the battle-axe, was the longest and the sharpest.

Bhadrashrenya was now very happy. Due to the organised strength which his young Gurudeva had imparted to his people, they were becoming strong. He could, therefore, look upon the future with some hope. Thanks to the young master, the Yadavas had already become powerful in Saurashtra. With the increased strength of the 'Satakas,' they extended their territory in every direction, established check-posts on the frontier which touched the domain of the Sharyatas who, so far, had been the more powerful of the two tribes. Bhadrashrenya was now easy in his mind. Sahasrarjuna, his great Chief, was still busy with his expeditions beyond the Narmada and by the time he returned and directed his attention to Bhadrashrenya, the Yadavas would be too formidable to be crushed.

Revat, the King of the Sharyatas, the father of Bhadrashrenya's youngest queen Revati, saw that the Yadavas were growing powerful, and began to take steps to consolidate his own strength and extend his frontiers. This also led to clashes between the two tribes.

Another cause led to a serious deterioration in the relations between the two tribes. So far the sea-faring traders of Patala (Hyderabad-Sind), when they came to Saurashtra in their ships for trading horses for various merchandise, dealt with all the Aryas on equal terms. The

horse was the most valuable instrument of the Aryas in war and, therefore, every fine horse meant added strength in war.

These traders from Patala, when travelling from the ports into the interior, were, more often than not, looted by robber gangs belonging to several tribes. This normally led to a free fight between the robbers for their booty. Rama, however, with his extraordinary ingenuity, stole a march over the other tribes by entering into negotiations with the traders. The traders were to supply the finest horses to the Yadavas in return for Rama's 'Hundreds' undertaking to protect their route from the ports to the Yadava *Gotra*. No sooner were the negotiations completed than Rama established check-posts on the highway and his disciples began to keep the roads clear of the robbers. As a result, the grateful traders began to present their finest horses to Rama, and gave preference to the Yadavas in their barter of horses.

Revat, the King of the Sharyatas, was very perturbed over these developments. With the Yadava *Gotra* growing in prosperity and the 'Hundreds' riding their fine horses and dominating the countryside, the Sharyatas were losing the advantage in war. He, therefore, decided to bring things to a head. He invited all his tribesmen to a sacrificial session and sent his son, Jyamadha, to the *ashram* of Bhargava to invite him to attend the sacrificial session and be the principal priest on the occasion.

When Jyamadha arrived at the *ashram*, he was surprised to see how well the *ashram* was organised. He also saw the disciplined strength of the 'Satakas' and was struck by the way in which they were being trained in arms and horsemanship. He realised the importance of the mission on which his father had sent him.

Jyamadha prostrated himself before Bhargava,

presented him with gifts of cows and horses and respectfully invited him to preside over the sacrificial session.

Rama smiled indulgently: "Jyamadha, your father is very kind, but before I come, the Sharyatas would have to purge themselves of the sin they have been committing. If you give up *adharma*, I will call off the curse of the Maha Atharvan."

"*Adharma*?" asked Jyamadha in surprise. "Are we devoid of *dharma*?"

"Brother, yes, there is *adharma* among the Sharyatas," replied Rama affectionately. "If once your father decides to uphold *dharma*, there will be no need to send me any invitation. I shall come to you myself."

"What do you want us to do, Lord?" asked Jyamadha. Though he was not accustomed to the blunt manner of being talked to in this way, he could not help feeling humble in the presence of Rama.

After a few moments of silence, Rama said in accents slow and calm: "Jyamadha, tell your father that the Sharyatas should give up hunting the Nagas. It is *adharma* to capture the sons of Manu as if they were rabbits."

"But the Yadavas also capture the Nagas in the forests," said Jyamadha.

"I know they do. I wish I were their High-Priest; I would then ban it. Bhadrashrenya is willing to do so and the expeditions are becoming fewer every day. And here my *ashram* provides them a safe asylum. Why does not your father help me?" said Rama.

"But, won't you, Lord, come to the sacrificial session and tell my father what you want him to do?" asked Jyamadha.

"No. I will come if he bans the hunting of the Nagas, and no sooner he agrees to do it, I will see that the

Yadavas stop it, High-Priest or no High-Priest," said Rama.

Jyamadha shook his head signifying that that was not an easy matter. "But we are a very high-spirited people. We do not like the Yadavas encroaching upon our territory when they come to hunt the Nagas."

"The best way, therefore, is for your father and Bhadrashrenya to agree to stop this hunt of the Nagas. It is the lowest of all *adharma*. And you can assure your father that the moment he agrees to stop the hunts, Bhadrashrenya will agree to do so," said Rama.

"Should I go empty-handed, Lord?" asked Jyamadha.

"No, Jyamadha," said Rama, "take this message from me to your father. Tell him to make friends with the Yadavas, to send you with 50 young Sharyatas to live with me. You should associate yourself with Prateep in suppressing all robbers from looting or kidnapping the Nagas. You should join me in protecting the traders from any harassment in the Sharyata territory. I want your father to stand by Bhadrashrenya and spread *dharma* throughout Saurashtra. You cannot spread *dharma* by fighting the Yadavas."

"We do not want to fight the Yadavas, I assure you," said Jyamadha.

When Jyamadha was leaving the *ashram*, Rama gave him his final message: "Tell your father, Jyamadha, that I am not an instrument for increasing the power of Bhadrashrenya. To me he is only an instrument for spreading *dharma*." The voice of Rama had a deep note of decision. "If Bhadrashrenya is attacked, I shall take it that *dharma* itself is attacked."



## THE HUNTERS HUNTED

Bhadrashrenya had come to know that King Revat had decided to attack the Yadavas no sooner the sacrificial sessions were over. Jyamadha's visit, he was informed was only to find out the strength of Rama and his 'Satakas.' Worried beyond measure, he sought Rama's advice immediately after Jyamadha left the Bhargava *ashram*.

Rama, however, was unperturbed. "I could see clearly what Jyamadha had come here for. He came only to find out whether you were strong enough to resist his father. He also wanted to know what sort of a man I was," Rama said with a smile.

"What impression did he gather, Master?" asked the king.

"He was taken aback," Rama said. "He will tell King Revat not to let you grow stronger."

"What will he do? When will he attack us?"

"I don't know."

"Then we must prepare for battle."

"King, don't worry. He will have to fight the battle at the time and in the manner I choose," said Rama.

"How will you do it, Master?" asked Bhadrashrenya.

"Can't you trust me?"

"Trust! I leave myself and my Yadavas in your hands. Do with us as you like. If we can't win with you to lead us I know we can't survive," replied Bhadrashrenya reverentially.

Immediately Bhadrashrenya left Rama went to Kukshi's place. Prateep and Vishakha were shocked to hear that Gurudeva himself had gone to the house of the High-

Priest which he had never visited all these years. It was something difficult to understand.

When Rama came to Kukshi's house, Kalvini was transported with joy. All these days, she had been madly in love with him, sought every opportunity to know all about him from Vishakha and Loma, saw him as often as she could. But her husband had forbidden her to go to the *ashram*, and she was pining for an opportunity to meet Rama to talk to him, to win him, to bask him in his smile which everyone said was fascinating.

Now the great moment had come. He had come to her house and her husband was away. The enchantress in her impelled her to wear the most captivating smile and cast the most maddening glances. She moved with voluptuous grace, playing the gracious hostess, talking the sweet things which she alone knew how to say.

Rama smiled indulgently, replied in monosyllables and behaved with exasperating detachment. Kalvini was excited; if he had shown just a little warmth, she would have fallen at his feet or flung herself into his arms. Her exciting experience, however, came to an end when her husband, Kukshi, arrived.

Kukshi was equally surprised to see Rama come to meet him, and after formal civilities enquired of him the object of the visit.

"I have come to ask a favour of you, Sage," said Rama.

"Favour! And from me! Certainly," said Kukshi, amazed.

"I want you, O, Markandeya, to ban the hunt of the Nagas."

"To ban the hunt of the Nagas!" said Kukshi in surprise.

"Yes. Jyamadha, the son of King Revat of the

Sharyatas, has just been to me. I asked him to request his father to stop the cruel treatment which the Sharyatas extend to the Nagas."

"Yes?"

"And he replied that even the Yadavas were doing the same. He was right. If the Yadavas are guilty of unrighteousness, we can't ask the Sharyatas to follow *dharma*. You must, as the Guru, issue a mandate that the Nagas should not be hunted."

"How can I do it? I am not the son of the great Jamadagni," said Kukshi, mockingly.

Kukshi owned quite a few dozen Nagas and had heartily disapproved of Rama's actions in interfering with the age-old custom of hunting the Nagas. He now got an opportunity to show Rama his proper place. Whatever his pretensions, it was he, Kukshi, who, as the High-Priest, could issue the ban on the Yadavas hunting the Nagas in the forest.

"I assure you, it is in the interest of the Yadavas that you should ban this wicked practice," Rama told Kukshi.

"I don't think so," Kukshi replied almost with a sneer. "Who am I to defy the practice sanctioned by our ancestors? You alone, O Bhargava, can do so. You are the mighty one."

"I take it then that you won't help the Yadavas....," said Rama, as his eyes grew steely.

"If I did so, I would harm the Yadavas," retorted Kukshi.

"The survival of the Yadavas depends upon it," Rama asserted.

"It is for you to save them, Bhargava," said Kukshi, with ill-concealed irony.

"I will, if the Gods so will," replied Rama.

"Bhargava, I have more experience than you have.

You are still young. If you believe the words of a man who has seen 55 years, don't meddle in this matter. The Sharyatas capture hundreds of Nagas from the forests and sell them in the market. If you try to stop their doing so, there will be a war between the two tribes."

The eyes of Rama became stern, though there was a smile on his lips. "War! War is coming. I can smell it. And if the Gods so will it, who am I to stand in their way? Best of Sages, I beg leave to depart."

The day was breaking in the dense forest which separated the territories of the Yadavas and the Sharyatas. Four or five forest-dwelling Nagas, stunted, naked and dwarfish, came out of their little crevices. Quivering with fear, they looked on all sides and made sounds like the whine of a fox. In response, two or three Nagas came out of the jungle. From one side, a woman, half-naked, came out with two children. Eight or ten others also came out of the forest and joined them.

As the Nagas ran down the slopy bank to quench their thirst from the stream, thirty or forty Sharyatas and Yadavas suddenly rushed forward from behind the trees and encircled the Nagas as they were drinking water. The Nagas, terrified, shrieked. Their children began to cry. Most of them ran helter-skelter like rabbits.

The hunters untied the ropes tied to their waists and adroitly flung them like lassoes on the Nagas. The nooses slipped on the necks or shoulders of the Nagas and they fell to the ground. The hunters then turned to the Nagas who had climbed up the trees and brought them down by throwing stones at them. One of the Nagas, seriously wounded, fell from the tree. Two children were killed on the spot; the hunters greeted their dying shrieks with loud mocking laughter.

Suddenly, with shouts of 'Victory' unto Maha-Athar-

van,' Rama and his companions rushed at the hunters. They threw the lassoes with expert skill on the hunters; the nooses were around the throats of the hunters, who began to shriek as wildly as the Nagas had done before.

Rama, stern and menacing, stood in front of them with his huge battle-axe in hand.

"Don't try to run," he shouted.

But, before he could finish the sentence, one of the hunters slipped off the rope from his neck and tried to escape. Rama saw him running and flung the battle-axe after him. The *Parashu* flashed like lightning. The head of the escaping hunter was severed from his body. Rama walked slowly up to the place where his battle-axe lay, lifted it up and serenely cleaned it with dry leaves.

"Whoever tries to run away shall die," Rama said. "Loma, you and Ujjayant should take these Nagas to our *ashram*, unless they want to go back to their forest homes. I am taking these hunters to King Bhadrashrenya."

Immediately after Rama brought the Yadava and the Sharyata hunters to the Yadava *Gotra* with ropes tied to their neck, he held consultations with Bhadrashrenya and his lieutenants.

"King, we are going to have a war with the King of the Sharyatas," said Rama. "I have driven him to precipitate a war."

"I am not afraid of him. I have fought him very often," replied Bhadrashrenya.

"But this time I want you to let me fight him," Rama said.

"He is very powerful and very cunning and cruel," replied Bhadrashrenya. "He has three times the warriors that we have. If he had his way, he would not leave a single Yadava alive."

"King, in sixty years of your life, you have fought



nineteen wars. Thousands of men were killed. Hundreds of women were kidnapped. Yet there has been no peace between the Sharyatas and the Yadavas. Let me fight one war."

"What difference will it make?" asked the King in surprise.

Rama was silent for a moment. Then he was transformed into an embodiment of immeasurable strength, something which stood apart from and above all that was happening. "This will be the last war between you two."

"Last!"

"Yes. After this war, no Sharyata will ever kill a Yadava nor kidnap a Yadava woman nor take away your cows," said Rama with fearful decisiveness. "This war will end all wars between you two. Then *dharma* will prevail between the Yadavas and the Sharyatas."

"How will that be done?" asked Bhadrashrenya in amazement.

"The Gods are all-powerful," Rama said.

Bhadrashrenya was seized with fear, for Rama's eyes had a dangerous light in them.

After a while, Rama broke the silence and added: "Don't forget. As soon as Sahasrarjuna returns from war, he will try to destroy you. You cannot afford to have an enemy to fight in Saurashtra."

Bhadrashrenya did not understand the meaning of what Rama was saying, but tears of gratitude welled in his eyes. He fell at the feet of this eighteen-year-old Master. "Gurudeva, I am at your service. Do what you like."

"Kurma," Rama turned to the headman's son. "Go to the King of the Sharyatas. Present the Sharyata hunters whom we have captured as a gift from King Bhadrashrenya. Tell him that hereafter whoever hunts a

human being will invite the curse of Guru Bhargava."

"As you please," replied Kurma.

"Also tell King Revat that King Bhadrashrenya wants Queen Revati and Madhukumar to return to the Yadava *Gotra*."

"Yes, Master."

"And tell him also this. On the full-moon day of Vaishakha, all Bhrigus are going to Gokarna Teertha on the frontier of Anarta. Bhargava and his disciples will go there two days before, on the 13th of the Shukla fortnight and will return five days after the festival. If King Revat is pleased to come here on the tenth day of the dark half—*Krishna Paksh*—King Bhadrashrenya will give complete satisfaction to the Sharyatas."

"The tenth day of the dark half of Vaishakha, two months from now!" exclaimed Bhadrashrenya.

"Yes. Don't you worry." And the voice of Rama was low but fearsome. "For, on the full-moon day of Vaishakha, all hostilities between you and the king of the Sharyatas would have ended."

Then Rama turned to Prateep. "Prateep, prepare for a pilgrimage. On the 13th day of Vaishakha Shukla, we shall start for the Gokarna Teertha with five 'Satakas,' 500 of our best men, with horses and weapons perfected in the art of war. Vishakha, you go with Kurma to bring Queen Revati back and keep your eyes open."

"Ujjayant, you go and convey my orders to all our frontier posts. All the young men should organize themselves into 'Satakas.' They should allow no one to enter the territory of the Yadava *Gotra*. No one should be permitted to harass any trader." Then he turned to the king: "King, the Yadavas are few; their enemies are many. The Yadava women must be ready to share the burden and the risk with their men."

## "BONE OF MY BONE"

Though Loma was now busy with organizing the young women of the Yadava *Gotra*, she was unhappy. Her hunger for Rama increased every day, and so increased her fear of Kalvini, Kukshi's wife.

Kukshi, the High-Priest, had gone to the sacrificial sessions of Revat, the king of the Sharyatas. With her husband away from the Yadava *Gotra*, Kalvini began to visit the *ashram* every day, joining Vishakha in its active administration. She threw herself in the way of Rama, bustled about with voluptuous grace whenever he happened to be passing by, and shot her glances conveying reverential affection at him whenever she could catch his eyes.

Loma began to compare herself with Kalvini. She herself was hard-knit like a boy. Her body lacked the voluptuous curves of Kalvini. By her frequent use of the bow and the discus, her hands had become hard. Moving constantly with men, she had acquired their mannerism. She knew not the ostentatious modesty which allures, nor the practised smile which fascinates. She realized with anguished distress that Rama treated her as if she were a younger brother and no more, and in the race for his heart she had been beaten by Kalvini.

One day, as Rama was offering oblation to the God of Fire, he found the sacred grass missing; Kalvini, anticipating his wish, smiled as she alone could smile, and fetched the grass. As she handed it over to Rama, she smiled her enchantress's smile; Rama smiled in return and took the grass from her hands.

Loma saw the exchange of smiles and flushed red.

When the sacrifice was over, she had no doubt left that she had lost her Rama.

With a breaking heart, she went to the stables and clung to the neck of Suparna, Rama's favourite horse, whom both of them loved so well. Losing all self-control, she cried, her face buried in the mane of the horse. Then she untied Suparna, and riding astride as she always did, led him to the forest. On the river bank, as the horse halted to drink water, she dismounted and again clung to its neck and wept.

She had no one to turn to; she was alone—all alone—in the dreary world. Her brother was her enemy. Her parents were dead. Guru Lopamudra had gone southwards with her lord. So far she had lived in and for Rama; but now he was no longer hers. Her heart was desolate. As she burst into sobs, Suparna alone, with mute affection, rubbed its nose against her body and tried to console her.

When Loma returned to the *ashram*, she was told that Kalvini had suddenly taken ill and had sent for Rama. Loma felt as if she was drowning, never, never to be rescued.

When the maid-servant of Kalvini came with the message that she was ill and wanted him to come to her, Rama was surprised. This was an unexpected request from her. But it was not unusual for the leading Yadavas to call him if there was sudden illness in the family, for he was heir to the magic arts of the Atharvanas.

Rama was taken by the maid-servant to the hut outside the *gotra* which Kukshi sometimes used as a retreat. When he entered the hut, the maid-servant closed the door, saying, "Lord, there is no one except my mistress in the hut. All the disciples have gone to the sacrificial sessions."

As Rama entered the hut, he saw Kalvini lying on a

bed of antelope skins. She looked out from the skin which covered her body, like the moon emerging out of a dark cloud.

"Master, you are welcome. Forgive me for inviting you here. I cannot get up from my bed," she said in a trembling voice.

Kalvini raised herself in her bed and pointed to the fruits lying there by way of respectful offering, saying: "Will you accept this humble offering, lord?"

Rama did not like the way that this woman was behaving; he sensed effrontery. But courtesy forbade him to show his displeasure. He took one berry from the fruits offered and put it in his mouth.

"Let me know why you have called me here."

"Bhargava, come here," Kalvini said, with a voice into which she successfully brought concern as well as weakness. "Your life is in danger; so is that of King Bhadrashrenya."

"Who will harm me?" asked Rama with a smile.

"Come near. Please come near, lord," Kalvini said.

As Rama leaned forward, she lost whatever control she had. "You are in great danger. I tell you, you are in great danger," she repeated, her voice shaking with impatient passion.

"What have I to fear for? Don't worry," said Rama. For the moment he was deceived by the anxious tone.

"I am very much worried," Kalvini said. "I am not even able to sleep at night for fear, lord. Every moment is a nightmare, for I do not know what will happen to you the next moment. Bhargava, I am very weak. Give me your hand and let me sit." She extended her hand.

Rama hated the idea of touching another man's wife, but felt that, if she was really ailing, it would be cruel to deny her the help she wanted. Kalvini took his extended

hand. Her body thrilled, she threw away all restraint.

As the coverings were displaced, Rama saw that she had no dress on. And as he saw her well-developed breasts rising and falling in excitement, a strange light came into his unmoving eyes.

"Bhargava, Bhargava, what are you looking at? Come, hold my hands, save me," she said as her eyes, inflamed by passion, invited him to herself.

Like a well-shaped mare, Kalvini stood up in all the beauty of sinewy grace as she threw off the deer skins, every limb of hers throbbing with impatience.

Rama stood up. His face, usually serious, became grim. His eyes, lit up by a dangerous sternness, fell on a whip which had been suspended on a peg nearby. Taking a slow, deliberate step, he took it into his hand and with the unerring skill of an expert trainer of horses, lashed out once across her breasts and again across her hips. As Kalvini jumped, she shrieked in pain and anger. Rama coolly replaced the whip on the peg and walked out of the house.

As he returned to his *ashram* walking fast, he understood what he had never thought of so far, the significance of Kalvini's voluptuous glances. The attraction which lay behind the bond which subsisted between his father and mother, between Soma and Ruru, her mad lover, between Prateep and Vishakha, became clear to his eyes. He now knew the lure of the body and the union of flesh which marriage meant.

He had never seen a beautiful young woman in the way that he had seen Kalvini a few moments ago. He had often seen Loma bathing in the river changing her deer skin, but he had never given any thought to her body; today the very lines of that body, which he had never troubled to look at so far, assumed a new meaning. He



saw as if by the flash of lightning that he and Loma were husband and wife.

When this new light came to him, he was surprised at his not having seen it all the time. Now he felt a rare exhilaration. His feet almost grew wings.

This strangely-constituted far-visioned young man who could never feel a doubt nor entertain a fear, who had never doubted that as a Bhriгу the Gods had commissioned him to establish *dharma*, felt a doubt. Loma had refused to marry any one so far. Suppose now she were to refuse to marry him! Then he laughed outright: "Impossible. We were married to each other the moment I was born," he said to himself.

Rama went to the *ashram* and walked up to the tree, under the shade of which Loma and two elder women were sleeping. As he stood at a little distance and looked at her, he saw her in a new light. He looked at the moon which was just rising above the distant trees; then as he looked at Loma again he felt convinced that she was destined to be the mother of his children.

Rama went over to Loma, to all appearances sleeping. But she had not been able to sleep that night. Seeing that Rama had come near her she had just kept her eyes closed; but now she felt the burning glance of Rama and opened her eyes. She knew well those wonderful eyes that shone like the tiger's even in the darkness, and she saw in them a new light, both loving and hungry. As she saw them, love swept over her every fibre. The earth began to dance with joy under the burden of unbearable happiness. She closed her eyes again.

Rama saw her open her eyes and close them. Without a word, he lifted her, pressed her to himself and carried her out of the *ashram*. Loma kept her eyes closed in happiness. The moment for which she had

been pining had come at last.

Rama took to the forest path with Loma in his hands, and with steady steps, climbed a peak of Girnar and set her on a stone. Loma had now to open her eyes and saw the pale moonlight of *Krishna Paksh* which spread a dreamy atmosphere over the forest river and the mountain. With the sure instinct of a woman, she knew that Rama was no longer a friend, but a lover, her lord.

"Loma, do you know that wicked Kalvini invited me to her hut on a false excuse?" he said. "She stood in front of me, stark naked, inviting me to embrace her."

"Oh, then?"

"Then I picked up a whip and flogged her twice. I left scars, one on her breasts and the other on her hips. Now she will suffer the punishment for quite a few days."

Loma went up to Rama. "My Rama, Rama, what have you done?" she whispered, joy bounding in her heart.

"If she had not been the wife of Kukshi, the High-Priest, I would have taken her life. How can *dharma* prevail if such women crowd the earth?"

"Yes, Rama."

"Today, I saw something as clear as day-light, something which I had not seen so far."

"What is it?" Loma's heart throbbed with wild excitement.

"You are my wife," he said in his usual decisive way. "The blood of my blood, the bone of my bones, as Arundhati was to Vasishtha, Lopamudra was to Agastya."

"What do you mean?" asked Loma, faint with joy.

"I have made up my mind. You refused to marry Brihadratha. You refused to marry Arjuna. Don't say 'no' to me."

Loma did not know whether to cry or to laugh over

this strange lover of hers. Tears of joy sprang in her eyes and she fell on Rama's neck. "My Rama, shall I laugh or cry? Who told you that I am going to say 'no' to you?"

Rama looked at her in seriousness. "Now I know that you are my wife."

Rama hid his leonine head in her arms. Loma sat quietly as his hand moved over her body, but very, very softly lest she might be hurt. His eyes, with the light of a thousand moons in them and filled with a passionate devotion, enveloped her.

Then they got up, their hearts throbbing in unison and their eyes gazing into each other's.

With a voice husky with emotion, Rama said, "I wish Amba or Vimada had been here."

As if in reply to his wish, the quietness of the night was broken by the sharp, piercing note of a conch.

"Loma, Loma, this is the characteristic note of the Bhargava conch. There is but one man that can play it in this way," Rama said with joy.

He lifted the conch that hung by his waist and blew the Maha Atharvan's notes which usually the Lord of the Bhrigus blowed.

In reply to Rama's blast, one of the riders who had been galloping towards the Yadava *Gotra* blew a blast which had the same note a little changed.

"It is Vimada, no one else," said Loma. "You, lord, and I should go to welcome him."

Rama noted the respectful 'you' as distinguished from the 'thou' with which she was in the habit of addressing him, smiled, and gathered her to him in his right arm.

## CHAPTER LIV

### A PARRICIDE'S PUNISHMENT

Rama, accompanied by Loma, went to receive Vimada, his old teacher, who had come to Saurashtra from Aryavarta to meet his young master.

When Vimada saw Rama, whom he had brought up from his infancy and taught the use of weapons, grown into a splendid young man, radiating power, with a brilliant battle-axe on his shoulder, he dismounted from his horse and prostrated himself before him. Rama embraced Vimada with effusiveness rare for him. Loma stood by with tears of joy in her eyes and King Bhadrashrenya declared a three-day festival for his tribe.

Vimada told Rama of what had happened after they left for Saurashtra. At first there was a talk of sending an army to invade Sahasrarjuna's territory, but nothing came out of it as King Sudasa would not think of it and Sage Vasishtha was more interested in rousing the Aryas to a war of vengeance against Prince Bheda.

"Then," continued Vimada, "your messengers brought news from time to time that both of you were with King Bhadrashrenya in Saurashtra doing well and building up the strength of the Yadavas. At first, the Best among the Sages would not listen to my coming over here to bring you back. Ultimately he agreed and I have come to Saurashtra with two hundred of our best men. I have posted about one hundred of them on the road, so that we could return safely to the port. Our boats are waiting for you."

Then he turned to King Bhadrashrenya: "Now, when will you send my master and Princess Loma with us?"

Bhadrashrenya was a picture of helplessness. "Acharya, if Gurudeva leaves us now, what will happen to us?"

"You won't send him back?" asked Vimada sternly.

"Acharya, Lord Pashupati is my God of Gods and Bhargava is my Teacher of Teachers. I will not keep him for a day longer than necessary. He is the master; I am his slave. Who am I to say 'no' if he wants to return?" Bhadrashrenya fixed his prayerful eyes on Rama.

Rama in his usual way smiled, and then gave the answer.

"Vimada, I will not come. Bhadrashrenya rescued me from the hands of Arjuna, accepted me as his Guru, placed everything that he had at my disposal. You see, he does not stop me from returning. The Yadavas have placed themselves completely in my hands; how can I leave them now? Vimada, as soon as Sahasrarjuna returns from the war, he will try to destroy them. If we go away from here, he will not leave a man, woman or child of this *gotra* alive. I am not a prisoner of Bhadrashrenya, he is mine."

"Is it so?" queried Vimada. "Then, what shall we do?"

"Don't you worry!" said Rama. "It is even your *dharma* to save the Yadavas from this calamity. I will return to Aryavarta one day, but not as you want me to. I will come in the forefront of Yadava warriors, as the Guru of Bhadrashrenya. A Bhargava is not merely a sage; he is the thunderbolt of the Gods; he can see *dharma* and enforce obedience to it."

"But what about Princess Loma?" asked Vimada.

"About me?" asked Loma. "Don't you worry also! My brother wanted me to marry someone anyhow. Well, I have decided to get married myself. We were only wait-

ing for you, Acharya, to perform our marriage ceremony." She glanced at Rama in a way that left no doubt as to whom she wanted to marry.

Vimada, amazed, folded his hands before the young master. "Lord, you are unfathomable. What are you doing?"

"I am going to marry Loma during the festival which follows Vaishakhi Purnima (full-moon day), and you will be the Acharya."

"Why Vaishakhi Purnima?" asked Vimada.

"On that day all the Bhrigus will meet at Gokarna Teertha and celebrate the birthday of the Foremost among the divine Sages, Bhrigu, and on that day..." and the voice of Rama became prophetic—"Bhadrashrenya, the Best of the Yadavas, will hold undisputed sway in Saurashtra."

Those who heard these words did not hear any prophecy in it; it appeared to them a simple statement of an accomplished fact, and none of them knew what was passing in the mind of the inscrutable master.

"Then what shall I do?" asked Vimada.

"Vimada, you are my teacher. Teach me now what you had left untaught so far."

"As the master pleases," said Vimada.

Then, like sparks flying one after the other, Rama issued his commands speaking with irresistible authority.

"Vimada, ask a few of our Bhrigus to go back to Sapta Sindhu. Let them tell the Venerable that you will return later; that we both are all right and will soon be married. You, Sesha, go with some of the Bhrigus to the different settlements in Saurashtra. A few old Bhrigus live in almost every settlement. Tell them what my wishes are: On Vaishakha Shukla 13th I will start for



Gokarna Teertha from here; let them all join me on the full-moon day."

"Is King Bhadrashrenya also coming there?" asked Vimada.

Rama did not reply.

"Gurudeva, what are you thinking? Why do you want to keep us in darkness?" asked Bhadrashrenya.

"King, I will tell you all after Kukshi, Queen Revati and Madhu return to Yadava *Gotra*. I feel that there will be trouble, perhaps an attempt to dispose of you and instal Madhu as the king."

Bhadrashrenya and Vimada were shocked to hear about the suspicion which Rama entertained.

However, when the sacrificial sessions of the King of the Sharyatas were over, Queen Revati, her son Madhu, Vishakha, Kukshi and Kurma returned to Yadava *Gotra* accompanied by fifty Sharyata warriors. Just as Rama had anticipated, three days later, Prateep's mother, the eldest Queen of Bhadrashrenya, discovered that his food had been poisoned. The fact, however, was discovered in time and the King narrowly escaped death.

Rama only smiled when he was told that what he had anticipated had come true.

Kukshi was now busy making some mysterious plans in consultation with some leading Yadavas. Evidently, something serious was on.

Ultimately, the report reached the ear of Bhadrashrenya and Rama that a plot was afoot to kill the king and instal Madhu as a successor, after Rama and his 'Satakas' and Vimada and his Bhrigus had left for Gokarna on Vaishakha Shukla 13th.

In the meantime, the *ashram* of Bhargava was preparing for the visit of its members to Gokarna. Vimada, the great teacher, was busy training the 'Satakas' in the

use of weapons and horses. Rama moved among them wrapped in fearsome isolation, his eyes full of concentrated fire, silent as an image of a God except for the few words he issued now and then.

Vaishakha Shukla 13th came. At midnight Rama and his 'Satakas' were to start for Gokarna Teertha. In the afternoon, the young men of the 'Satakas' took their horses to the distant fields for grazing as they did every day. Five Sharyata warriors also went with them to graze their horses, while the rest of them stayed in the *gotra* spending a happy time with some of the friendly Yadavas.

In the evening Prateep went to his father King Bhadrashrenya.

"Father, I have brought a message from the master. To-night many things will happen. Two hundred Shar-yatas are coming here at midnight to kill you and make Madhu the king of the Yadavas. Keep enough men ready to meet the danger if it comes. I am soon going to accompany the master. Forgive me, father, for thus leaving you undefended; but these are the master's orders. Give me your blessings; I hope to meet you soon."

"My son, I know all. Obey the master and look after the Yadavas if I am not alive to do it."

A little before they were scheduled to leave, Rama took Prateep with him into the forest by a circuitous path.

"Are we ready to depart?" asked Prateep. "The men have already gone to work."

"No, we have still to complete our preparations," said Rama.

In the meantime one of the disciples who was waiting for Rama in the forest path came and whispered something in his ears.

Rama with his battle-axe in his hand turned towards a footpath which branched off to the left.

"Prateep, have you the courage to face all?" said Rama.

"Yes, Gurudeva," replied Prateep.

The three of them went a little further, where in a little opening in the forest they saw in the moonlight Madhu and some of his friends sharpening their daggers.

"You stay here," Rama told Prateep with affection. "This is not good for you." He then proceeded further towards Madhu and his friends.

Madhu, startled, stood up and was taken aback to see Rama. His companions, though frightened, took their daggers in their hands ready for attack.

Rama stood stern and irresistible, his *Parashu* in his hand, veritable God of Death.

"Don't touch your daggers," said Rama. His frightening eyes held Madhu and his friends. "Madhu, you are sharpening these daggers for your father and your brothers. Is it?" Rama asked quietly.

Madhu turned pale, but before he could reply, the battle-axe of Rama flashed and Madhu's head rolled away, his body falling to the ground. His companions, seeing the terrible Bhargava, ran away.

Prateep, seeing his step-brother killed in this gruesome manner, fell to the ground in a swoon. Rama returned to him and helped him to recover.

"Prateep, a parricide has no place on earth nor in Heaven or Hell." And placing his hand on the shoulders of Prateep, he took him away.

Rama helped Prateep to mount one of the horses which were awaiting them.

Prateep, dazed, looked at Bhargava terror-struck. The master, with one cool, unerring stroke had decapitated

Madhu not with the venom of an enemy, but with the irresistible might of Fate. He was older than Rama by about seven or eight years but the dreadful way in which the master worked with impersonal destructiveness when *dharma* was in danger, made him shudder.

When they reached the outskirts of the village, four horses ready for battle, were awaiting them.

"We are only three?" asked Prateep. "For whom is the fourth horse?"

"You wait here," said Rama. "I am bringing the fourth rider."

Rama dismounted from his horse and left for the *gotra*.

## RAMA WAGES A WAR

With rapid strides, Rama reached the hut of Kukshi. The High-Priest was enjoying a hearty meal, Kalvini, with her best charms on, serving him.

Rama went into the hut with the tread of a conqueror, stood with his battle-axe in hand in front of Kukshi and in tones of irresistible command, said: "Kukshivan, come along with me."

On seeing Rama, Kalvini was about to say some words of welcome, but the words froze in her throat as she saw the fierce light in his eyes.

"Come along with me," commanded Rama.

"Where? And why now?" asked Kukshivan, amazed at the way Rama was addressing him.

"I want you to join the war, Prateep is marching on the Sharyatas. It is the duty of the High-Priest to be with the Crown Prince when he goes to war."

Kukshi was speechless for some time. Frightened to the core, he looked at Rama, dazed. "Against the Sharyatas! War!"

"Yes."

Kukshi shook off his fright and said with decision: "I am not coming. I am not going to come. Fight the Sharyatas! Why do you want me?"

The face of Rama was immobile in its stern majesty. "Kukshivan, come along with me," he said as he pointed to the door.

"What have I to do with war? I am a Sage. I do not understand what you say."

"I am the son of the Best of Sages, Jamadagni, the

head of your *Kula*. Your duty is not merely to see *dharma*, but to establish it."

A tremor shook Kukshi's frame. "But what have I to do with all this?"

"Kukshivan," said Rama coolly, "it is no use your waiting for Jyamadha. He will not come, though you are waiting for him; he and his men have gone to the Land of Yama. You cannot instal Madhu as the King of the Yadavas tomorrow as you want to, for he—the would-be parricide—lies dead. I killed him. Here is my axe with his blood on it, if you want to see it. Half the men of Prateep have reached the territory of the Sharyatas. The horses that you brought for the Sharyatas are now ridden by Yadava warriors. You are a Rishi. You are a Bhriгу. Even here, though you are the High-Priest, I am your *Kulapati*, the head of your *gotra*. I can cut your head off."

Kalvini, out of fright, wanted to shriek, but could not do so.

"Come along," said Rama. "You are the High-Priest of Prateep. Come and give him your blessings."

Kukshi, trembling in every limb, got up and followed Rama. The sobs of Kalvini broke the silence as Rama followed him. Arriving at the place where Prateep was waiting, Rama helped Kukshivan to mount the fourth horse which was awaiting its rider.

The five hundred disciples of Rama, all armed with battle-axes and the hundred and odd Bhriгus who had arrived from Aryavarta were waiting a few *yojanas* away from the Sharyata *gotra*; Vimada and Kurma were in command. After midnight, Rama, Prateep and Kukshi arrived on the spot.

Spies then brought the news that the Sharyatas were asleep. The King of the Sharyatas was enjoying the sleep of the victorious, for he had no doubt that his son Jya-



madha had by then installed Madhu as the King of the Yadava *Gotra*.

As Rama arrived, the leading warriors who were waiting for him, surrounded him, awaiting his orders.

Then the Master said: "Prateep, I have one thing to tell you which I have never told you before. From the earliest times, you—Yadava and Sharyata *gotras*—have gone on kidnapping each other's cows and women; you have killed each other and then every time you have patched up a peace. I am not interested in such a war. This war is to establish *dharma* for ever. If we fail, we do not want to live. Are you ready for the pledge?"

"Yes, Master. We pledge ourselves," the leaders said.

"We have not come here to take the Sharyatas captive. You know the stakes. Saurashtra cannot be united unless the war between the two *gotras* is waged in the way that I propose. If Saurashtra cannot be one, Arjuna will wipe all of you out. This is not a play war. It is war unto death. Listen to my orders: If anyone lets an armed enemy go alive, he will betray *dharma* and I will not let him live. But I do not want a single horse of the Sharyatas to be killed; all of them have to be taken alive."

As they heard these words of solemn command, the Yadava leaders were full of enthusiasm, and Vimada, who had seen the ways of Maha Atharvan Richika and the great warrior, Kavi Chayamana, felt like bursting with pride, for their pupil was saying and doing things which the others had so far but indistinctly said and incompletely done.

"And one thing more," continued Rama. "We have to take charge of all the carts of the Sharyatas and bring them with us, with all their old men, women, children, horses and cows, to the Yadava *Gotra*."

"What?" asked Prateep in amazement.

It was a normal thing that the *gotras* should fight among themselves and that someone or the other should be victorious or be vanquished. Then the victors would take the vanquished captive. The kings of the *gotras* would then make peace. The daughter of the vanquished prince would then be married to the victorious prince. Pacts would be made, captives released. Then the pacts would be broken and strife would begin again. But what Rama was now proposing was something revolutionary, something unthought-of.

"Prateep, tomorrow there will be only one *gotra*, not two," said Rama decisively and as he said this, every heart missed a beat.

"Come. I will show you the way. Follow me," said Rama, as he led his forces towards the Sharyata *gotra*.

The Sharyatas were happily sleeping in their huts and the carts, for they had been informed that Jyamadha and his Sharyata warriors would have, before midnight, taken the Yadava *gotra* by surprise, killed Bhadrashrenya and installed Madhu on the throne. They also knew that the dreaded Rama and his 'Satakas' had already left for Gokarna Teertha. The joy of the victorious was in the hearts of the Sharyatas.

Some time after midnight the Sharyatas woke up in surprise. They heard innumerable horses speeding fast towards the *gotra*. Before they could grasp what was happening, the thundering rush of horses came nearer and nearer and out of the silence of the night rang out the war cry of the Maha Atharvan which had not been heard in Saurashtra for decades.

In the darkness of the night, the Sharyata warriors got up somehow, untied their horses, armed themselves as they could. They rushed out in confusion against the invading forces of which they were completely ignorant.

What they saw was a sea of tall battle-axes rushing towards them, countless horses neighing in fury and hoofs thundering on the ground. They shot their arrows, but did not know in which direction they sped.

A forest of whirling battle-axes was upon them. Heads were severed, bodies were crushed, cries of distress rose to the heavens. The whole *gotra* awoke to an unimaginable terror. Women and children began to shriek. Those who could, fled to the jungles.

Rama, accompanied by Prateep and a few others, sped towards the little mud fortress in which the King of the Sharyatas was awaiting this onslaught. As they, in advance of their men, reached the gate, the King of the Sharyatas with about fifty warriors came forward, dismounted from his horse and prostrated himself before them. "Bhargava, Master, I fall at your feet. I surrender unto you."

Rama looked at Prateep, scorching him with his flaming eyes, but the Prince could not grasp the significance of the look. Rama took an arrow in his hands and flung it with all his might at the King of the Sharyatas. With one wild shriek, the King fell.

Rama's orders were scrupulously obeyed. When the sun rose in the sky, not one armed Sharyata was left alive. Immediately, the bullocks were yoked to thousands of carts in which the *gotra* used to travel from place to place. Placing the old and the weak, the women and the children of the Sharyatas in them, Kurma led the convoy together with the cows, bullocks and horses of the *gotra* towards Girnar. A large number of Rama's disciples returned with them.

A hundred and odd young Yadavas, who remained behind, collected all the dead bodies and with due respect consigned them to God Agni. Rama stood there watching

the vast conflagration, silent, collected and calm like the God of Death.

On the morning of the 14th Shukla, the Yadava *Gotra* received the glad news of the great victory which Prateep had won over the forces of the Sharyatas. Conches were blown in triumph and every Yadava climbed the Girnar to see the conquering hero returning in triumph. When they reached the top of the hill, however, everyone was lost in amazement. On the horizon they saw, coming towards them, a huge python of immense length, which they soon discovered to be a procession of carts and animals and horsemen winding its way towards them. The Yadavas rushed forward to greet the victorious army and the strange python of carts which was creeping towards them.

At the head of the convoy was Kurma, who prostrated himself before King Bhadrashrenya and his father.

"My son, what is this? Where is Prateep? And where is Bhargava? How many people have you brought here, and why women?"

"Where is Bhargava?" asked Loma anxiously.

Kurma gave the news to the King. "There is no Sharyata *gotra* now in existence. There is no King of the Sharyatas. Both tribes are one and the Master has enjoined that the old men, women and children of the Sharyatas should be adopted by the Yadava *Gotra*."

Bhadrashrenya could not, for the life of him, understand what it meant.

Kurma explained the whole thing fully: "Lord, I know what the Master taught us. In your sixty years, you have fought the Sharyatas on nineteen occasions. All our life, we have been afraid of the Sharyatas. The King of the Sharyatas hated us and we remained frightened of them. Hundreds of our women were kidnapped by

them and we kidnapped their women by the hundred. We stole each other's cows. Now the Yadavas and the Sharyatas will have only one King, one High-Priest, one headman, and the wealth of both the tribes will be with one *gotra*. Now will *dharma* triumph, for, we shall work together, speak together and live but with one mind. This is what our Ancients taught us. This is what Gurudeva has taught us today."

## GOKARNA TEERTHA

At Gokarna Teertha, on the bank of the river Gokarni, had gathered a vast assemblage of Bhrigus and Yadavas, and from all parts of Saurashtra and Anarta, pilgrims came—men, women and children—to celebrate the festival of the birth of the divine sage, Bhrigu, and to have a *darshan* of Rama of the Battle-Axe, of whom they had heard so much.

Vishakha, Prateep's wife, had also succeeded in inducing her father, Vrishni, the King of Anarta, to come to this festival with three hundred of his best warriors.

As the rumours of the fearful destruction of the Sharyata tribe reached the ears of those assembled at Gokarna, every heart was struck with trembling awe. No one had heard of such a terrible war nor of such a complete annihilation of a tribe.

Vrishni became anxious for his own safety and for the independence of his own kingdom. Was he called by Vishakha in order to be annihilated by this ruthless Bhargava, who wanted to establish Bhadrashrenya as the unchallenged king of Saurashtra? Vishakha, however, assured him that Bhargava was not what he thought him to be, that Bhadrashrenya would never wage a war against Anarta and that the annihilation of the Sharyata *gotra* became necessary as Kukshi, the agent of Sahasrarjuna, was trying to destroy Bhadrashrenya.

Then came Rama, accompanied by Bhadrashrenya and the headman, Loma and Prateep, followed by 500 to 600 riders armed with fearful battle-axes. As they approached the bank of the Gokarni, they all dismounted from their horses and reached the *mela* on foot. The



whole assembly of men, women and children rushed forward to welcome Rama, to prostrate themselves before him and to take the dust off his feet. The Bhrigus, who, since the days of Richika, had lived inconspicuously with different *gotras*, shouted the battle cry of Maha Atharvan with exultation.

Vrishni saw the statuesque beauty of the formidable Master and prostrated himself before him. Then Vimada began preparing for the sacrificial session, associating Kukshi with him, for he did not want to lose sight of that traitor.

Next day, the leaders met in the hut of Vrishni, the king of Anarta, who expressed his disapproval of the total annihilation of the Sharyatas.

"Anartaraja, if the kings do not come together to follow *dharma*, what else can happen? Self-interest makes them blind. *Dharma* can flourish only if they combine to punish the wicked. If they cannot acquire that strength, they must be destroyed."

Vrishni was shocked to hear such opinions coolly and decisively enunciated. "But you have completely destroyed the Sharyata *Gotra*, Master."

"Why are there different *gotras*? Wherever men are bound together by *dharma*, there is only one *gotra*. Here, as also in Sapta Sindhu, kings fight among themselves, for each one of them believes that what he says is *dharma*. From that belief flow wars, strife and misery. There is only one *dharma* which applies to all men, and the king who opposes that *dharma* does not deserve to be a king."

"But if the guru does not advise the king properly, what can he do, Master?"

"All the gurus can teach but one *dharma*: men should be allowed to live as the sons of Manu. If they

cannot do that, it is my *dharma* to see that they do it."

"But all this talk is futile. Once Sahasrarjuna returns from the war, he will destroy whatever you have done," said Vrishni.

"I am waiting for him to return. I am quite ready," said Rama with a smile.

"What will you do then?" asked Vrishni, as the others, with trembling heart, leaned forward to know the next move of the Master.

"I cannot do anything," said Rama slowly and quietly. "Gods themselves will do everything. Arjuna and Mrigarani, his so-called queen, have one aim in life: to spread destruction. Immediately he returns, he will destroy the Yadavas and kill Bhadrashrenya."

"That is what I fear too," said Bhadrashrenya.

"That is why I have brought you, King and the king of Anarta, together here."

"But, suppose he does something to you."

"He cannot touch me," said Rama. "He cannot touch the grandson of the Maha Atharvan; he cannot marry Loma, for the Best of Sages has pronounced a curse on his doing so. And today Vimada is going to perform our wedding ceremony; hereafter she will be the wife of his guru," said Rama.

"But what about the Yadavas?" asked Vrishni. "What about us? If we stand by you, he will take our lives. He is a blood-thirsty man."

"I want you to keep him as blood-thirsty as you can," said Rama.

"How can we do that? His wrath will destroy me and my *gotra*."

"It is only when the wicked become angry that they meet destruction. I put you to the trouble of coming here for that very reason. Before Sahasrarjuna arrives, Mri-

garani has not enough forces to invade the Yadavas without your assistance. If I guess aright, she will wait for Arjuna and in the meantime invite Bhadrashrenya and me to Mahishmati."

"Oh you, and alone!" Loma could not help exclaiming.

Rama smiled indulgently, love lighting up his eyes. "Even you have such little faith in me?" he asked, and Loma looked down with a sense of guilt.

"But then what will happen to the Yadavas?" insisted Vrishni, the king of Anarta.

"Immediately we are called by Mrigarani, you will fall upon the Yadavas and annex their territory," replied Rama with a smile. "Then nothing more will be left to be done, and my young brave Yadavas and whoever wants to accompany them will flee into the forests of the north—at least they will appear as fleeing."

"But what will happen to King Bhadrashrenya?" asked Vrishni in surprise.

"I have already settled it with King Bhadrashrenya. He is willing to die at the hands of Sahasrarjuna if the Yadavas are saved."

"But if I help Bhadrashrenya, we will be destroyed ourselves."

"I am sure nothing is going to happen to you. I am showing the right way to save your daughter, your son-in-law and both the *gotras*."

"How do you know that?"

"If we are summoned to Mahishmati, the Yadava warriors, under the leadership of Prateep, will go into the jungles of the north in search of fodder for their horses and cattle. You will take charge of the women, children and old men of the Yadava and Sharyata *gotras*. You can send word to Sahasrarjuna that you have captured them. He

would be happy, for you would have done his work. You will become the Lord of Saurashtra."

"You see," Rama added with a smile, "I have come here to give Vishakha's father a greater kingdom than he ever dreamt of. This is the only way to save the Yadavas from destruction."

"But where will they all go? Suppose they all die in the jungles."

"I would not let them go there if there was any chance of such a disaster. Venerable Chayamana once told me that his father came to Sapta Sindhu from Mahishmati not by sea, but passing through the jungles and mountains in the north. What the great Kavi did, Prateep can do it again."

"Sapta Sindhu? Oh Gods!" said Vrishni.

"Yes. There is no other way to escape the wrath of Sahasrarjuna. But Pradeep would not be destroyed, rest assured. I will join him and he will return to Anupadesh to destroy Sahasrarjuna."

"But what if Sahasrarjuna kills Prateep?" asked Vrishni.

Rama looked at the king of Anarta inscrutably. "I already see Sahasrarjuna lying dead. *Adharma* can never live".

Vrishni, as if in a dream, looked at the face of Bhargava which had grown fearful.

The sacrificial session began. Vimada and Kukshi acted as the presiding priests. During the session, Rama and Loma were married. The unmarried Yadavas were also married to young Sharyata women. There were dinners, dances and joyous songs.

Jyamadha, the son of the late king of the Sharyatas, and a few of his warriors who had been taken captive

when they lay concealed in the Yadava *Gotra*, were now brought before Rama.

"Jyamadha," Rama addressed him with affection, "you are a brave man. I can understand what distress you feel. The memories of your beloved dead have set your heart aflame. But didn't I tell you that we have to make one *gotra* out of the two and that there was no other alternative? You refused to join hands with the Yadavas. What can I do? But you are a brave man. Forget everything. If you dislike the Yadava *Gotra*, then here is Vimada, the best among the warriors, the son of Kavi Chayamana, the lord of all the learning of the Bhri-gus. He will adopt you all in his family."

Jyamadha came forward, his eyes aflame. "Rama, son of Jamadagni, listen. You killed my father and my brothers. You destroyed my *gotra*. And now you want me to be the son of your *Acharya*! You are not the son of a rishi; you are the God of Death. No, you are not a God; you are a demon. You do not teach *dharma*. You behave with gross *adharma*. My father is dead; my relatives are dead; my sisters and brothers have been adopted into the Yadava *Gotra*. You left no trace of my *gotra*. You have been the great destroyer. Kill me, I beg of you. You have the heart of a beast of prey. But Jyamadha is a Sharyata and will remain one ever and for ever. And in this life or in the next, I will only be satisfied when I will drink your blood."

These insulting words made the Yadava and the Bhri-gu warriors angry, but Rama lifted his hand to restrain them from speaking or doing anything.

"Jyamadha, do you want to remain a free man? Then go, my friend. I let you go free. And what do you want? I shall give you whatever you want."

"What I want! Take this." With unexpected

swiftness, Jyamadha snatched the sword from the hand of a Yadava who was standing near him and flung it at Rama with all the force he could command. Loma shrieked and rushed to intervene and received the blow. She screamed and fell to the ground. Rama lifted her up.

Wild uproar and uncontrollable confusion followed, and in that confusion Jyamadha disappeared.



## CHAPTER LVII

### MRIGARANI

Mahishmati on the banks of the river Reva — Narmada as we call it now—was a great city. The ships of Patala, Sumer and Misra were anchored in its port. Arjuna's ships of war were also anchored there, ships which carried his warriors across the seas to spread destruction as he pleased. In the markets of the city met the Aryas, the Dravidas, the Nagas and the Kollas, merchants from Patala and Shonitpur, speaking different tongues and behaving in strange ways.

On the banks of the Narmada was the principal shrine of Pashupati. Next to it was the *ashram* founded by Maha Atharvan Richika, which now was occupied by High-Priest Mrikund. By its side was the fort of Sahasrarjuna, perched on a hill, inside which were wooden houses, where lived the king, his entourage and his principal warriors and courtiers.

On the terrace of one of the mansions, a dark woman, about thirty years old, was seated on a bed of tiger skins spread on a wooden platform. The shape and line of her body reminded one of a spirited mare. Her finely aquiline nose was shaped in pride. Her eyes flashed irresistible power. Her well-knit but curvacious limbs testified to the irresistible hunger for the joys of the flesh.

The confederate tribes of Haihayas and Talajanghas shuddered at the very name of the Mrigarani. Sahasrarjuna had many queens, but she was not one of them; she had never been joined to him in wedlock. No one knew from what tribe she came nor who her parents were. But she wielded tremendous power; Sahasrarjuna, the dread king, danced to her tune.

Mriga had wielded power from the day Sahasrarjuna captured the kingship of Mahishmati. She pulled all the threads of power, controlled the army, kept the people in awed submission, dealt with kings and guided intrigues. The dauntless king, who never listened to anyone, heard her submissively, for she was his guide and philosopher, his goddess of power and victory. Throughout life she had also lived only for him and worked to extend his power and maintain his prestige, and the king, the queens and all those who counted, were her playthings.

In the front of Mriga sat the High-Priest, Guru Mrikund, on a plank. He was old and hunchbacked, with a humorous twinkle in the unfathomable eyes. When Richika, the Maha Atharvan, left Anupadesh after subjecting Sahasrarjuna's grandfather Mahishmat to a curse, he found difficulty in finding a guru; no one of the Bhrigu tribe was forthcoming to replace the powerful Maha Atharvan or to invite his curse.

King Mahishmat, however, knew Mrikund, a young and ambitious Bhrigu. Man of little learning, but clever, shrewd and ambitious, he carried on some petty trade. Mahishmat, who knew his man, immediately appointed him his High-Priest.

Mrikund did not like this sudden transformation inflicted upon him, but he was afraid of the king and had to accept the position. He tried to play his part as best as he could; began to live like a rishi; accepted the worship of the tribesmen and with the aid of some friends, began to perform *yajnas*. But more than that it was his uncanny and worldly wisdom which gave him authority. He at once won over the queen of Mahishmat and the brilliant young Yadava general, Bhadrashrenya, whose sister was married to the Crown Prince, Kritavirya.

When Mahishmat died and his son, young Kritavirya,

succeeded him, Mrikund helped Bhadrashrenya, the brother of the young queen, in building up the power of Mahishmati. After the premature death of Kritavirya, he also stood by Bhadrashrenya, who had begun initiating his sister's son, Arjuna, in the art of kingship. Arjuna grew up to be a powerful, wild and uncontrollable king; Mriga became the real power in the land. Guru Mrikund, however, continued to be their guide and confidential adviser.

Old Mrikund was at the moment looking at Mriga sorrowfully. "Evidently, this boy is wonderful. I want to know all about him before I meet him."

Mrikund slowly passed his hand over his yellowish beard and said, "You know all about him."

Mriga's eyes were almost seeing a dream. "He was riding a horse like your God Surya himself," she muttered to herself.

"Mriga," said the Guru. "Keep your heart under strict control; you have not yet grown old. Otherwise, you will add one more to our worries."

"I go mad whenever I see a handsome man," Mriga said. "He looked wonderful."

"You are already losing your balance, Mriga," said Mrikund, laughing uproariously. "Sahasrarjuna is afraid of him and my disciple Kukshi trembles every time he hears his name."

"I do not like the look of your disciple, Kukshi."

"Oh, he is very useful," said Mrikund. "We would have never known what Bhargava was doing in Saurashtra but for Kukshi."

"What shall we do with him now?" asked Mriga absent-mindedly.

"It is just as well that we invite Bhargava here," replied Mrikund. "He would be less dangerous here. I

wish we had called him earlier. The king committed the greatest blunder of his life in bringing Bhargava here. And if he had brought him here, he should have straightway established him as the High-Priest. No one can control this boy. He is a miracle-worker. Now, in order to control Saurashtra, we shall have to destroy the Yadavas and the Sharyatas—a difficult job. Now that he is here, the Bhrigus will not listen to me. For a long time, I have been trying to make them believe that I am their *Kulapati*, but I will have to give up that pretension now," Mrikund added frankly.

"What will happen now?" asked Mriga.

"Bhargava is like poison in the throat of Pashupati. We cannot swallow him and cannot throw him out," said Mrikund, with cool cynicism.

"Oh, don't say that. Your wisdom will always come to our rescue."

"My wisdom has come to its end. It is only in the absence of the diamond that the stone will shine," said old Mrikund with a twinkle in his eyes. "I am but a trader. He is our Guru, grandson of Maha Atharvan. Nobody will look at me when he is here."

"Oh, please don't say that. You have been our High-Priest for many years."

"Mriga, I know what I can and what I cannot. I never dreamt that this boy was so wonderful. Wherever he is, he will do what he wills and upset all apple-carts."

"Then there is only one of two alternatives. Either we dispose of him or drive him away to Aryavarta."

Mrikund shook his head sadly. "Mriga, don't forget that he is my *Kulapati* too. I cannot allow even a hair of his head to be hurt. I am afraid you could do nothing to him. He will neither die nor run away. He will be here all the time."

Mriga laughed uproariously, her shining white teeth flashing like moonlight. "Gurudeva, you have suddenly become old. Let me meet him. Then we shall see what we can do. I am not likely to accept defeat. What is his wife like?"

Mrikund put his hand to his forehead in despair. "His wife?" he exclaimed. "Mriga, you will never understand a woman like her. They are one in thought and deed; they can understand each other without a word; they live in each other. Mriga, not all your charms can separate them."

Mriga smiled contemptuously. "Gurudeva, today you have become a poet."

Mrikund smiled. "I may not be a rishi, but I have eyes and am never deceived. It might turn out that we have committed a mistake in calling this boy here. All right, let us call Bhadrashrenya here. But take care, he is our enemy."

Mrigarani adjusted her scarf and her girdle.

## CHAPTER LVIII

### MRIGA'S PLANS

When Bhadrashrenya entered the room, all the three realised that the partnership which had subsisted between them for years had been dissolved.

Mrigarani, who made it a point never to forget her position, stood up and bowed with folded hands before Bhadrashrenya. Guru Mrikund extended his hand and blessed him.

"Uncle," asked Mriga with a sweet smile, "will you let me know what this means? You are the King's uncle, teacher, right-hand man. What is this?"

Bhadrashrenya looked at Mriga with his usual bold frankness. "Mriga, what is the use of this talk? I have been the architect of all his royal power. Can I ever destroy it?" The voice of Bhadrashrenya was sad with wounded affection.

"Then why do you annoy the Chakravarti? Why did you destroy the Sharyatas? Why have you raised this Bhargava to the position of a God?" asked Mrikund.

"Best of Gurus, if you want to blame me, you may. But do not forget the danger which has faced us all the time. For the last twenty years we have been trying our best to save Arjuna from his own wayward selfishness, but have not succeeded."

"Is that the reason why you have become hostile to the Chakravarti?" asked Mriga.

Bhadrashrenya laughed outright. "I want to save him, if he would let me. I know Arjuna inside out, better than even you know him. We planned to get him married to Sudasa's sister. What did he do? He went to Aryavarta and annoyed Sudasa. He insulted sages like



Vasishtha and Jamadagni, and captured the most venerable among women, Renuka. He was ready to perpetrate an outrage on the princess whom the whole Aryavarta was ready to give him in marriage. He invited the curse of the great sage Jamadagni. Yes, it is true that I did not allow him to commit an outrage on Princess Loma or to kill the Venerable Bhargava. If these are my faults, I am happy to have committed them. By committing these faults, I have saved you all from the enmity of Aryavarta and the wrath of Gods."

"And now you are intriguing against Chakravarti?" asked Mriga severely.

"Intrigue! Yes. Why not?" asked Bhadrashrenya boldly. "He is anxious to destroy me, his uncle, who brought him up, and my Yadavas. He removed me from my office as the General of his army. He interned me in my own *gotra*, appointing Kukshi as my gaoler. I am not complaining about these things. You have no power to listen to my complaints. You are the plaything of arrogance and short-sightedness."

"King, you are abusing your master and us," said Mrikund.

Bhadrashrenya smiled. "Have you not decided to destroy me and the Yadavas?" he asked.

The straightforwardness of the king unnerved Mriga. She turned pale. Mrikund came to her rescue.

"King, you are only imagining things. I know you fully well."

Bhadrashrenya shook his head unhappily. "I only know that if you do not listen to me, you will have to be sorry for it."

"But why did you destroy the Sharyatas hip and thigh?"

"It was the command of Gurudeva. He said that it

was much better to have one consolidated tribe than to have two tribes warring endlessly."

"But why did you allow him to do it?" asked Mriga.

"Because I have faith in him. I may not understand what he says, but whatever he says must be the truth."

"How can you consolidate tribes like this?" asked Mriga. "We have better experience."

"Nonsense!" muttered Mrikund.

Bhadrashrenya said in a low voice: "Best of Gurus, Bhargava wants to make one *gotra* of the sons of Manu from Sindhu to Simhal."

"Dreams, Dreams!" exclaimed Mrikund.

"Have we not nursed the dreams of making Arjuna the Chakravarti from Sindhu to Simhal?" retorted Bhadrashrenya.

"How can we extend power in the way that this boy says?" asked Mriga.

"What does he understand?" asked Mrikund.

Bhadrashrenya laughed. "He, not to understand! Mriga, he is giving to our dreams a body and a soul. We could not see the weakness of our plans. We thought it was statesmanship. But Gurudeva is right. Without the force of *dharma* to back us, we cannot establish an empire. If we do, it will not last a day. Don't make a mistake. Bhargava may be a boy in age, but he knows life and the whole of it, as no one else does; he loves it and he wants to rescue it."

Mriga looked at Bhadrashrenya with contempt. "This boy will do what we could not do with our strength!"

"Yes, he would, if Arjuna would listen to him."

"Oh, I see, I see," said Mrikund as if what the King had said was a huge joke. "You want Chakravarti and

Bhargava both to combine in performing the miracle. Ha, Ha, Ha,!"

When Bhadrashrenya left them, Mriga and the Guru looked at each other meaningfully.

"Bhadrashrenya is just as he was," said Mriga, "a great intriguer."

"No, he is more dangerous than he was," said Mrikund. "He wants to control Chakravarti through Bhargava."

For some time both were silent, but evidently struck with the same idea.

"Guru, we *must* dispose of this mad young fellow," said Mriga firmly.

"Not the way you mean," replied Mrikund.

"Jyamadha, the Prince of the Sharyatas, is here. You know it," said Mriga.

"Yes. He wounded the Venerable Loma and came away here in the company of wandering Aghoris. But the difficulty about him is that he wants to kill Bhargava."

Mriga was silent for a while. "Where is the difficulty? Send Jyamadha to me. I will talk to him. You may now go. I will come to your *ashram* to have a *darshan* of Bhargava."

Mrikund shook his head. "It is not easy to kill Bhargava. All right, we shall talk when we meet again."

## CHAPTER LIX

### MRIGA PLAYS THE HOSTESS

When Guru Mrikund left her, Mriga was lost in thought. So far, she had lived for her ambition; today she was frightened. Would the ambition of Bhargava come in the way of her own ambition? This thought was followed by another. If Bhargava could make Bhadrashrenya so powerful, why could he not make Sahasrarjuna still more powerful? Anyway she must make a friend of this powerful young man. She must try that at any cost.

Mriga had heard all sorts of stories about Maha Atharvan, Jamadagni, Renuka and Kavi Chayamana, and felt nervous when she arrived at Mrikund's *ashram*. She saw Rama Bhargava sitting under the *peepul* tree, wearing a tiger-skin, his inseparable battle-axe *Parashu* by his side. She was immediately fascinated by his majestic look, the way his locks had been matted and his modest, kindly smile. She admired his perfect body full of strength and grace. She also cast a glance at the Venerable Lomaharshini, delicate and pale, reclining on deer skins by his side, her eyes fastened with devotion on her husband. Mrikund was sitting there, as also Bhadrashrenya and thirty other men, listening intently to what Bhargava was speaking. Hundreds of others were coming to have a *darshan* of Bhargava and prostrate themselves before him hungering for his blessings.

The heart of Mriga began to throb with unfamiliar excitement. She lost her sense of self-importance and also prostrated before Rama, who gave her blessings. Then she prostrated herself before Bhagawati Loma. Mrikund could not restrain a cynical thought. "She is always impertinent towards me, because I am a fake guru. I am

glad that at last she has met a real guru and found out where she stands."

"Live for a hundred winters," said Rama to Mriga with an affectionate smile. "May you have happiness for ever. And where is Jayadhvaja?"

"He has gone out ahunting. He will come and have your *darshan* tomorrow, Master," she replied. Mriga had brought up Jayadhvaja, the Crown Prince of Arjuna, with the affectionate care of a mother.

Mriga felt as if she was in dream. She heard the voice of Rama almost caressing in its softness. "I have heard so much about you, Mrigarani. King Bhadrashrenya always talked about you in admiring terms."

"That is very kind of him," she said and smiled. Unexpectedly her heart was filled with joy and pride.

"I heard that Chakravarti Arjuna is returning to Mahishmati very shortly," said Rama.

"Yes. Are you now quite recovered?" Mriga turned to Loma solicitously and asked.

"Yes," replied Loma with a pale smile. "I nearly escaped death, you know." Then she laughed sweetly. "I had not expected you to look so wonderful."

"What did you expect me to look like?" asked Mriga.

"Stalwart and fearful to look at," added Loma and laughed.

"Please let me know if you want anything," Mriga turned to Bhargava with folded hands.

"What more do I want?" asked Rama with a smile. "I had the *darshan* of Guru Mrikund; I now live in the *ashram* of my grandfather Maha Atharvan. I worship Lord Pashupati that he himself had worshipped. I have the *darshan* of Reva, the holy river which I had prayed to so very often in my infancy. And now I have met you, the cleverest of women. What more do I want?"

This compliment so graciously paid left Mriga with a sense of elation she had never felt before. "I wish you would stay with us all the time," she said impulsively, but was shocked to hear herself giving expression to such a sentiment. What would Arjuna say to this?

Rama's eyes met her candidly. "If you followed *dharma*, you won't have to invite me to stay; I would come myself, uninvited," he said.

Mriga was surprised and asked: "Don't we follow *dharma*?"

"Do you?" replied Rama. "You do not respect learning, neither *tapas* nor truth. I call it *adharma*."

"Then teach us *dharma*, Gurudeva," said Mriga. There was just a slight touch of irony in her voice.

Rama looked at her in a way that frightened the ironical mood out of her. "Would you let me teach it to you? Reva is the sister of Saraswati, the mother of learning. The banks of both the rivers have been created for the *ashrams* of rishis. You will find *dharma* only where Vedic *mantras* are chanted by those who know *Rita* and follow truth and *tapas*."

"I have not been to Aryavarta," replied Mriga apologetically. "Nor have I had the *darshan* of Mother Saraswati."

"Aryavarta can be here too, if you only know how to make it. Wherever *Rita* is followed, there is Aryavarta."

"But we have *kshatra* (valour) in plenty," replied Mriga.

Rama looked at her indulgently. "Mrigarani, what you have is not valour, but vaingloriousness. By calling it valour, we cannot deprive it of its inherent vice. There is no difference between valour and *Rita*. True *kshatra teja* shines like *Brahma teja* in *Rita*, *tapas* and *dharma*."



"Gurudeva, would you and Bhagawati come to dinner with me tonight?" Mriga changed the subject with a smile.

Bhadrashrenya looked at Rama in a way so as to suggest that he should refuse the invitation. Mrikund was so surprised that as he looked at Mriga, he appeared to ask the question 'What trick are you up to now?' Mriga had a terrible reputation; few men whom she disliked came to her dinners and returned alive.

But a frank and trusting smile played on Bhargava's face. "Certainly I would, but Bhagawati will not. She is too weak to come," he said.

Mahishmati was under a spell. The fact that Maha Atharvan's grandson had come to them was enough to throw its people into a worshipful mood; to this was added the awe due to Rama's terrible reputation and his fascinating personality.

Curiously, Mriga, the cleverest and most cold-blooded of those who formed the court of Arjuna, was more enthusiastic about him than all the rest. She felt a joy she had never felt before. At last she had met a man who understood her, as no one else had. To him, she was not Arjuna's mistress who held sway over his empire, just an innocent girl, a little wayward, a little imperious, but good and trustworthy all the same. He was the one man, she was convinced, who could realise all her dreams for her.

Guru Mrikund soon discovered that Mriga's armour of cold-blooded cunning was shattered, and warned her: "Mriga, beware of Bhargava. I know you are ready to fall at his feet. Even at my age my heart is in excitement about him, so I can understand what you would be feeling about him."

"What do you think, Guru? Shall we be stronger or weaker if we get him as our friend?" she asked in return.

"I am sure Bhargava will add to our strength," said Mrikund. "Our empire will grow more powerful. But then the empire will be neither yours nor Chakravarti's; it will be his; whatever he wills will happen. If we place ourselves in his hands, we can do whatever we want—or rather he wants. Your dream of world empire will be realised. But don't make a mistake; Arjuna, with his conceit, will not suffer him for a moment."

"Let me see what happens tonight," said Mriga. "Perhaps I can work a miracle."

"Let me warn you again. You are like my daughter. Keep your passions under control. Otherwise you will burn down the house over our heads," said Mrikund.

"Don't worry. Have you no confidence in me?" she replied. "I am cool enough to extinguish all fires."

In spite of what she had said, there was no denying that Mriga had begun to behave just like a little girl. Before it was evening, she could not help going to the rampart and wait for Bhargava. When after a long wait she saw a tall shadow climbing up the hill to reach the fort with a battle-axe in hand, she was mad with joy. Her dreams also became boundless. If only Bhargava could be made to be the prop of Arjuna's empire, she would be able to rule from Sindhu to Simhal. "What will he get for me?" she continued to ask herself.

She came down from the parapet and stood near the door of her mansion to receive Rama.

"Gurudeva, you are welcome. Come and purify this little hut of mine," she said with rare humility.

Rama placed his battle-axe outside the door. "Shall I leave it here?" he asked. The tone had a significance which conveyed to her that he trusted her implicitly.

"No, bring it in," she said.

"Why do I need my battle-axe with you as my

hostess?" asked Bhargava. Mriga understood what his tone implied and felt embarrassed. No one had trusted her throughout life, not even Arjuna; and now this unknown man was placing his life in the hands of the mistress of his bitterest enemy, in complete confidence.

Mriga humbly fell at his feet, washed them and served him the dinner herself.

"I have been wanting to meet you for the past three years," Mriga said sitting herself in front of him, after Rama had begun to eat.

"If you had just sent me word, I would have come to you," Rama replied. "Why did you ask that Kukshi to keep a watch over me?"

Mriga looked down nervously. "You don't like Kukshi?"

"He is mean, cunning, selfish and scheming," replied Rama. "By appointing him a guru, you have disgraced the office."

Mriga found it difficult to be formal with Rama. "Gurudeva, shall I ask you one question? Is it true that you whipped his wife Kalvini yourself?" she asked.

"Oh, the story has reached even your ears!" Rama replied. "You must ask me why I did not kill her outright."

"Then what about a woman like me?" she asked.

Rama became serious and quietly said: "A wife is the reservoir from which springs purity and family both. She cannot be one without the other."

"Then you would certainly kill a woman like me," Mriga smiled again.

"Don't I know your devotion to Sahasrarjuna? But I would like to see that what you are to him by your lifelong devotion is sanctified before the Sacred Fire. If you

are fit to be his wife, why are you not one?" he asked looking at her intently.

"What is the difference between me and Kalvini?" she asked him with a sigh.

"Kalvini is married to Kukshi and yet is faithless to him. You are not married to Arjuna and yet you are faithful to him," replied Bhargava.

Mriga felt as if a cruel blow had fallen on her. She had been more than a wife to Arjuna, the object of his affections, his guide, his minister, his saviour. Why was she denied the rightful place of a queen? Because she was not a princess born but a nondescript?

"I am doing what I can for Chakravarti and I beg of you to give me all the help that you can," she said.

"My help is ready for you to take," replied Rama with a smile. "You maintain *dharma* and your empire will endure by itself. If you want it done, invite the rishis from Aryavarta and let them teach *dharma* to you. I shall ask Venerable Jamadagni to send some of his disciples here; they will bring learning and *tapas* with them. They will go into the forests and establish *ashrams*."

"Our people will not understand this," said Mriga. "They only know how to kill others and establish an empire."

"*Tapas* is necessary even to found empires," said Rama.

"Will you explain all this to Sahasrarjuna?"

"Will he understand?" asked Bhargava in reply. "He only believes in overwhelming the weak by brute force. He knows how to kill those whom he dislikes, but does not know how to die for *dharma*," he added.

"Is there no hope for him?" asked Mriga.

"If there had been, you would have saved him long ago," Rama replied.

"Why do you say this? Show us some way. Save him, if not for his sake, for my sake." She was surprised at her own humility, but could not help speaking words which came straight from her heart.

"There is only one way to save him. Let him accept you as a consort before the Sacred Fire."

Mriga felt how helpless and untenable her position was; she was not Arjuna's queen, nor ever could she be one.

"I do not belong to a royal family," she cast down her eyes.

"But you have all the capability and devotion of a queen." Rama saw the wretchedness of Mriga and changed the subject. "Mrigarani, why do you persecute the Yadavas?"

"They destroyed the Sharyatas unnecessarily," replied Mriga with a little hauteur. She was now every inch the queen. "Do you want to bring all the kings under one yoke?" she asked.

"No. I want to make all the *gotras* one," replied Rama with so sweet a smile that her hauteur vanished.

"Why?"

"All wars result from the hatred between kings. Remove all *gotras*; let them be one, and wars will disappear."

"I do not understand this," said Mriga.

"It is not easy to extend the bounds of Aryavarta from Sindhu to Simhal either," replied Rama. Mriga did not say a word. "I want to ask a favour of you," said Bhargava.

"What is it?"

"Do not try to harm Bhadrashrenya. Otherwise you will have to count me as your enemy," said Bhargava, his eyes frankly challenging Mriga.

"Why should we harm him?" she asked nervously.

He evaded the idle query. "Mrigarani, I leave Bhadrashrenya to your care. I have full confidence in you," he said.

Bhargava then bade her good-bye. When he had gone, Mriga felt lonely and desolate. She had not one real friend in this world in spite of all she had done for Arjuna. Now this strange man had come into her life who could not be fitted into the world as she knew it.



## CLEARING THE DECK

Rama was very firm. "Bhadrashrenya, you must go away from here. If you stay here, my difficulties will be greater. Your life is also in danger. Mrigarani wants to finish you off."

The eyes of the old king were humid. "Gurudeva, there is no end to my trials. I do not know what sins I have committed that the Gods should torture me like this. My *gotra* is disbanded. My wife and children are wanderers. And now you ask me to leave you alone." The king broke down.

"King, this is the test of your courage. Greatness, which defies even death, comes only through trials. If we are afraid of trials, we are defeated. Like gold, we must pass through fire and become cleaner and more brilliant."

"But, how can I leave you? It is only your presence that gives me courage," said Bhadrashrenya. "And how can I go alone? Mrigarani's men will track me down in no time."

"Don't worry. You go and send Mrikund to me. I will arrange everything. Then you go to the banks of the Mahi where Vishakha and Prateep are waiting for you. If need be, I shall invite you here."

Bhadrashrenya left, and in a short while, Mrikund came to meet Rama. The old High-Priest was anxious to know what had passed between Rama and Mriga.

"Best of Gurus, let us go and walk on the banks of the river," said Rama.

Mrikund sensed solemnity in the voice of Rama and felt nervous.

"Come along, Mrikund. I have heard so much about

your cleverness. I want to talk straight to you. What do you want to do with Bhadrashrenya, with the Yadavas and with me?"

Mrikund was taken aback.

"You do not want to tell me that?" asked Rama.

"How do I know it?"

"You are a shrewd man and a wise one," said Bhargava. "If you do not want to tell me what you propose to do with us, I will tell you. You kept Bhadrashrenya at Girnar in order to keep a watch over Bhagawati and myself. Why did you call us here? You do not want to tell me. All right, I will tell you. You want to keep us under your watchful eyes."

Mrikund tried to interrupt, but had no courage to do so.

Rama continued: "In two days you have already seen that I am not the foolish, impetuous boy that you had thought me to be. You have realised that you cannot kill me. You cannot destroy the Yadavas without the help of the king of Anarta. You can only destroy Bhadrashrenya. Once he was your comrade; he is no longer one."

"Master, we have no such intention," said Mrikund in a diffident voice. "And anyway who listens to my advice?" he added.

"Best of Bhrigus, you do not speak the truth," said Rama, reminding Mrikund of the tribe to which he belonged and of which he was the head. "You and Mrigarani are thinking how to make me an instrument of your power and that of Sahasrarjuna. Why do you worry? I myself am ready to become your instrument, but only on one condition: Bhadrashrenya and his Yadavas must remain harmless."

"What can we do? Bhadrashrenya killed the Shar-

yatas. That has roused fury in all hearts," said Mrikund, trying as fast as he could to gauge the intentions of Rama in talking with such blunt frankness.

"You *have* to find the way to keep Bhadrashrenya and the Yadavas safe. If you touch even a hair of his head, count me as your bitterest enemy. You cannot kill me and you will find it hard to deal with me."

"Who can ever dare to deal with you, Master?"

"And you cannot stop me from dying by the side of Bhadrashrenya," said Rama sternly.

"No, no, Master. Why do you say that?" said Mrikund in complete confusion.

"Mrikund, you are a Bhrigu. I am the son of the Best of Bhrigus, your *Kulapati*. I tell you: Give up the intention of disposing of Bhadrashrenya. If Mrigarani has made a resolution to do so, induce her to give it up."

"But who wants to do that? It is only your suspicion."

"Do you speak the truth?" Rama faced Mrikund with blazing eyes. "Then, give me your solemn word,—take an oath—vow in the name of our Fathers, Bhrigu, Shukra and Chyavan, that you will save Bhadrashrenya at all costs."

"What is the use of my taking an oath to no purpose? Nobody is going to hurt Bhadrashrenya."

"Then I impose the vow upon you," said Bhargava quietly, "by my authority as your *Kulapati*."

Mrikund looked at the flaming eyes, the stern look and the face set in an inalterable decision, and began to tremble in every limb.

"Mrikund, I know, once you were not ashamed to accept the office renounced by Maha Atharvan. And today you want to deceive me." Rama placed his hand on the shoulder of Mrikund. "You have been clever all your

life. Today I impose upon you the vow in the name of our Fathers. It is your duty to save Bhadrashrenya."

Mrikund looked at the fearsome Rama, with his toothless mouth wide open, its lower jaw trembling. He loved his life and was afraid of Rama's ever-ready battle-axe. He had also no courage to invite the wrath of the tribal Fathers, for he had always looked forward to a happy life with them after death.

"Do you know how Madhu died? And the king of the Sharyatas?" asked Rama in dreadful accent. "The moment you are untrue to the vow I have imposed on you and betray our Fathers, your head shall stand severed from the body."

"But what can I do? It is Mrigarani who decides everything," said Mrikund in a piteous voice.

"As long as I am alive, I shall not allow a Bhrgu to break his vow. Do you take the vow or not?"

The frightened Mrikund tried to look away.

"Do not look for hope. Nobody will come to your rescue," said Rama. "No one can stop me from maintaining the high tradition of the Bhrgus." Then Rama added: "You are a wise man. Don't let your wisdom forsake you. Don't bank on Sahasrarjuna. I see him dead before my very eyes." Rama pointed a finger to a spot in the middle of the river.

With eyes opened wide in fear, Mrikund looked towards the spot pointed out by Rama, and in the simmering moonlight, saw on the waters of Narmada, Bhargava, his head almost touching the sky, standing triumphant, and before his feet lay the body and the head of Sahasrarjuna severed from one another! The legs of Mrikund collapsed under him. He fell to the ground and clung to the feet of Rama. "Master, forgive me. I take the vow. I shall carry out whatever orders you give me."

"Then send two of your sons with your trusted men, with Bhadrashrenya. Let them take him safely out of Mrigarani's reach. I will also send Vimada and four Bhrigus with him and,"—the voice of Rama was full of portent—"if day after tomorrow, Vimada and the Bhrigus do not return with your sons—I shall kill you."

Mrikund folded his hands and stood trembling in every limb. "What shall I tell Mrigarani tomorrow?"

"Tell her the truth that you are not the one to disobey the mandate of your *Kulapati*."

"No, no, how can I do that?"

"Then, all your life you have told so many lies that you would not find any difficulty in telling one more."

Next day Bhadrashrenya left with the sons of Mrikund and Vimada. A few days later when Vimada returned with the men, Bhargava began a sacrificial session on the banks of the river.

The whole of Mahishmati and crowds drawn from wherever the news of the sacrificial session reached, came to join it and have a *darshan* of the grandson of Maha Atharvan. Mrikund had never seen such a properly conducted sacrificial session and felt proud to sit next to Rama near the Sacred Fire. Mriga also came to the session every day, developing a devotional attitude towards Rama, unfamiliar to her.

The crowds came to have the *darshan* of Rama all hours of the day and half the night. So far, people of Anupadesh had lived under the shadow of the terror which was Sahasrarjuna; for the first time, therefore, their enthusiasm and devotion found spontaneous expression in seeing Maha Atharvan's grandson spreading the empire of *dharmā*.

On the twelfth day, when the night was dark and the crowds had dispersed and the attendants were all

asleep, Bhargava sat near the sacrificial fire in meditation, wrapt, his eyes closed. By his side, Loma and Vinada were sleeping. The supersensitive faculties of Rama sensed a serpent creeping towards him and he opened his eyes. Jyamadha, in the guise of an Aghori, was creeping near the sacrificial session, knife in hand. Jyamadha was now only a few feet away. He saw his bitterest enemy sitting in front of the fire as if he was asleep. The moment for which he had been waiting had come. One step more, one throw of the knife he held and the destroyer of his tribe would have been killed.

Suddenly, Rama's two flashing eyes, now wide open, shone like two live coals in the surrounding darkness. Jyamadha froze as if fascinated, unable to move. In that strange darkness, as if from the two luminous points, came a soft and affectionate voice: "Is it you, Jyamadha? Jyamadha, you want to take vengeance on me for my having killed your father and destroyed your *gotra*. Come, I would not stop you."

Jyamadha began to tremble. The voice had an affectionate ring which he had least expected. The voice, like a caress, continued: "What will you gain by killing me? Why don't you come with me? Join me in taking these people from darkness to light. I did not kill your father in anger nor for a selfish purpose. I did not destroy your *gotra* because of hatred. If you have no confidence in me, come, I tell you, come and kill me."

The caressing voice continued: "Jyamadha, I want to make one Aryavarta from Sindhu to Simhal. I want the Arya tribes to be devoted to learning and *tapas*. Why do you behave so? Come—come with me. Your place is by my side. Come. And if you have no faith in me, then, here I am. Let your knife do its deed."

The knife fell from Jyamadha's hand. The flashing



eyes, as tears choked him, became soft with affection. The voice was that of a caressing mother. Jyamadha got up with some effort and fled.

The sacrificial session was completed with pomp and ceremony. Mahishmati, which wore a festive look, felt a tremor as the news came that the victorious Sahasrarjuna was now camping across the river and would be returning to Mahishmati in a day or two.

## CHAPTER LXI

### ARJUNA IS ANGRY

Sahasrarjuna—Arjuna, for short—on his way back to Mahishmati had received reports about the doings of Rama. The reports from Mriga and Mrikund had also led him to believe that they had disposed of Bhadrashrenya and had brought Rama under their control. But when he camped closer to his capital and heard the reports of the popular enthusiasm evoked by Bhargava, he was undeceived. The popular enthusiasm appeared even to infect his army, for when his men heard that the curse of Maha Atharvan was revoked by his grandson, they felt happy.

When Arjuna reached Mahishmati, his fury knew no bounds. Triumphal processions were held, as usual, to celebrate the victory he had won, but he was disappointed. His people were no longer submissive as they were on all such occasions. They appeared to him to be self-confident, joyous, offensively aggressive. Even Mriga had changed considerably. She had acquired a new dignity. She spoke with a frankness and freedom which he found not only unfamiliar but irritating. Mrikund was also no longer the obsequious priest, but had a malicious glint in his small eyes which betrayed open criticism of himself. Even the courtiers appeared to feel a new elation.

The king felt that something had gone wrong. When he met Mriga, his first blunt question was "Where is that Rama?" Those who heard this rude question could not suppress their surprise. He could see that they were shocked by the contemptuous way in which he had asked the question. "Gurudeva is now in the shrine of Lord Pashupati. He will meet you as soon as you go to the shrine."

He was surprised to find in the voice of Mriga and of his courtiers the same note of deference for Rama which he had found in the kings and warriors of Aryavarta when talking about their gurus.

"I will show that Rama what I am," he muttered to himself.

According to the immemorial custom, before entering his palace, Arjuna went to the shrine to offer his homage. When he arrived there, he was surprised to see Rama and Bhagawati Loma sitting in front of the sacrificial fire in front of the inner shrine invoking the God of Fire. He saw that the crowd looked towards Rama with reverence. Even his new General looked at Bhargava with ill-concealed respect. An inarticulate fear, therefore, entered his heart, though with his usual astuteness he kept his temper under control.

When Rama and Bhagawati saw Arjuna approaching, they stood up and invited him to prostrate himself before Lord Pashupati. Arjuna did so and, carried away by the atmosphere, bowed low before Rama. Rama extended his hand and gave his blessings: "Noble son of Kritavirya, may your kingdom shine with learning, *tapas* and strength."

Arjuna was inclined to laugh outright, but with an effort he controlled himself. However, he could not help casting a glance at Loma, whom he had so vainly tried to kidnap, a glance full of malice. However, he maintained a distant respectfulness till he left the shrine.

After he had his dinner, Mriga recounted to him what had happened during his absence. The frontiers of the empire had been guarded. Wealth had increased. People were happy and satisfied. The feudatories were under control.

"Yes, all except Bhadrashrenya," said Arjuna with a contemptuous smile.

"Yes, but now Saurashtra is under the control of the king of Anarta. Bhadrashrenya is dead. His two elder sons were killed in battle. Madhu is dead. His son Prateep is now a wanderer in some distant forest," said Mriga with a joyful self-satisfaction.

"And this boy is now sitting in our shrine and is the darling of the people?" Arjuna spread his net in which Mriga was caught.

"Yes. I have won over Gurudeva also. He does not want the office of our High-Priest. He had even changed our people. People who used to be dissatisfied are now happy," said Mriga.

"Is that so?" mockingly asked Arjuna.

"Yes. I have had a frank talk with him. He has promised to help us. He will train our youth. He is thinking of expanding the bounds of our empire," said Mriga.

"What next?" asked Arjuna with a sneer.

"He was only waiting for your arrival. You will not only be the Chakravarti of the Haihaya tribes, but of the whole Aryavarta," said Mriga.

"And what does he want for all these favours?" asked Arjuna.

"Nothing," replied Mriga.

"Oh, I see. And what do you want?" asked Arjuna.

"What do I want?" exclaimed Mriga with a frank smile, for a moment forgetting how cunning her lord and master was. "You have given me everything."

Arjuna's manner bespoke overflowing confidence and affection. He said: "On such an occasion you must ask for some favour for yourself. You are putting yourself to no end of trouble for me. It is only my good fortune that I have one like you to stand by me. Come, come, ask

for something, Mriga." He twisted her hair with apparent affection round his fingers.

Mriga, usually so clever, now so full of enthusiasm born of her contact with Rama, was thrown off her guard. She said: "You are my all, Lord. What more do I want than that you should reign supreme and...."

"And what? Don't hesitate. What is your heart's desire? Ask and I shall grant it," coaxed Arjuna.

"Then.....," courage failed Mriga.

"Yes, then?" Arjuna prompted her.

"Then, grant me this boon, Lord. Accept my hand in marriage before the Sacred Fire," begged Mriga in a sobbing voice.

Arjuna lost his self-restraint. His face became frightful, distorted in anger and malice. From his throat issued almost a beast-like growl.

"Wench!" shouted Arjuna in a voice choking with anger. "You, beggar, you were wandering in the streets once. I lifted you to this position and that is now too small for you? Who taught you this? That enemy of mine, is it? And you are now his?" He dealt a blow to Mriga who fell from the wooden platform on which they were sitting.

Arjuna continued: "You two will keep my feudatories under control? You two will clear the forests and make a new Aryavarta and I, your plaything, will enjoy the position of a Chakravarti? Is it? Now I understand how you came to be devoted to this boy. You want to marry me? You, you wanton!" Arjuna kicked Mriga who, now seated on the ground, was crying. "You want to rule over my kingdom? And during my lifetime? I will show you now."

This was not Mriga's first experience of Arjuna's outburst of temper. She knew that when he lost his temper

he could not control his hand or his action. But during all these years he had never reminded her that once she was no more than a woman of the street. Today she felt as if a cruel blow had been dealt her and sobbed aloud.

"Silence, wench!" -shouted Arjuna and kicked her again. "I will deal with you properly." He clapped his hands and called a guard: "Call Talbahu," he shouted to him.

When Talbahu came and stood with folded hands for his commands, Arjuna said with a voice quivering with fury: "Talbahu, collect all the officers in the fort. Send men to all the city gates. No one shall go out of the city nor enter it without my permission."

Talbahu was taken aback by the blood-shot eyes of the Chakravarti. He said: "As your Majesty pleases."

"And you go to the shrine of Pashupati at once," continued Arjuna. "Ask that Bhargava to come here. Tell him that Arjuna invites him to the fort," he said with contempt. "And when he comes here, take him captive and bring him to me. And ask someone to keep an eye on his wife."

Talbahu was shocked, but was too trained a courtier to utter a word.

"And you wicked woman," the Chakravarti turned to Mriga, "if you leave this place, I shall kill you." He kicked her once again and left the place.



## CHAPTER LXII

### RAMA TAKEN PRISONER

When Arjuna left the shrine, Bhargava turned to Loma and said: "Arjuna's heart is full of malice. I know what we have to do. You and Vimada, with our Bhrigus, go to the place where we are training our horses and as soon as he decides on some action about me, escape from here."

"But what about you? How can I leave you here?" cried Loma.

"If you are not here, I shall have less anxiety," Rama said. And turning to Vimada, he said: "Vimada, my place is here. Don't worry about me."

"But, Lord, how shall I leave you?" Bhagawati Loma said in a piteous voice.

"Bhagawati, you and Vimada have to take the Bhrigus and horses and the Yadavas to Aryavarta. Bhadrashrenya is waiting near the river Mahi. Go and meet him and then contact Prateep. I will come to meet you when I feel like it."

Bhagawati and Vimada knew how to bow to Rama's wishes when he had made up his mind.

A little later Mrikund came to Rama, pale and trembling.

"What is the matter, Mrikund?" asked Rama.

"Sahasrarjuna is very angry," said Mrikund. "I have just received a secret message from Mrigarani. General Talbabu is coming to take you to the fort. You are in danger. Please escape as fast as you can."

"I was waiting for this message, Mrikund," said Rama quietly.

"Oh, please leave Mahishmati immediately. I don't

want to see my *Kulapati* being killed before my very eyes," said the old Mrikund with tears in his eyes.

Rama turned to Loma: "Bhagawati, don't wait for a moment. Nobody can touch me. There is no time to talk. Go," said Rama sternly.

Loma knew this mood of her husband. Without a word, but with eyes brimming with tears, she went, mounted her horse and, accompanied by Vimada and the Bhrigus, left. As she left, she cast a glance at her Lord, bidding good-bye. Bhargava replied by a sweet smile of unchanging devotion.

Mrikund folded his hands and said: "Gurudeva, what will happen to me?"

"Nothing is going to happen," Rama replied. "Only *adharma* will be destroyed. What else?"

Mrikund sat down: "Gurudeva, don't bring me into this matter."

Rama smiled. "You love your life even at this age?"

Talbahu came. Tall, broad-shouldered, of fearful mien, he was, but he looked sad as he came and prostrated himself before Rama.

"Live for a hundred autumns, General," Rama blessed the General and lifted him from the ground.

Talbahu said: "Gurudeva, the Chakravarti invites you to the fort. May Gurudeva do me the favour to come."

"I was waiting for the invitation, but I did not think that he would send you with the message," Rama replied.

Talbahu looked at Rama with veneration. This was a wonderful man, he thought. Mahishmati appeared to have acquired a new life since he came. And what a courageous man! He did not hesitate even for a moment to rush to his doom. "How can I save him?" thought Talbahu.

He silently followed Rama, as Rama with his battle-axe in hand left the shrine.

"General," said Rama, "Bhadrashrenya very often told me about your brave deeds."

Something stirred in the heart of Talbahu. "Master, the King of the Yadavas was always very kind to me." Then he suddenly said: "Gurudeva, may I make a humble request?"

"What is it?" asked Rama.

Talbahu lowered his voice: "From the rear gate of the *ashram* one can go straight to the camp of the Bhrigus. From there one can leave Mahishmati before it is dark. I also see from here that your horse is waiting impatiently for you. And the men who guard the shrine are all loyal to me. Take it that my eyes are closed."

Rama laughed and placed his hand on the shoulder of Talbahu with affection: "Bravest among warriors, I don't want you to close your eyes. I want you to keep them wide open. If all my disciples, even you, are prepared to kill me, what is the use of life to me?"

"But, Master, you don't know what the Chakravarti is capable of doing when he is angry," Talbahu whispered.

"Then I must conquer his wrath," said Rama.

Sahasrarjuna, huge, heavy and tall, walked to and fro with his mace in hand. His eyes glared fiercely. His hands were itching for murder. In front of him stood Rama, irresistible in supreme calmness. His hands had been tied behind his back, his feet were bound and eight men with drawn swords stood around him. Talbahu was there too.

"Boy," Sahasrarjuna thundered, "your end has now come. I let you go, not once, but twice, thrice. But you have sought your own doom. I will not let you live now." The eyes of Arjuna became blood-shot.

Rama stood calm and collected, his eyes emitting unflinching power. "Son of Kritavirya," he said slowly in

clear accents, "who are you to bind me and who are you to let me go free? You have gone mad. You know the fate of the man who takes his guru captive?"

"You will destroy me?" shouted Sahasrarjuna.

"You are destroying yourself," retorted Rama.

"Shut up," Sahasrarjuna roared. "You came between me and Loma. You made Bhadrashrenya a traitor. You killed my Sharyatas. You have made even my Mriga my enemy. You are a poisonous snake."

"Arjuna," said Rama. "I am the guru of your race. I am trying to save you. But you are blind. What can I do? You cannot be saved."

"You want to save me?" asked Arjuna in contempt.

"To save you is my first duty, if only you will let me perform it," said Rama.

"I do not want to be saved by you," said Arjuna.

"Arjuna, be calm and see things in the proper light," said Rama. "I have come here to show you the path which alone will save you. You keep your people in subjection; I can make them love you. You create strife; I can give you the strength of peace. You love to live in darkness; I can give you light. Leave these barbarous methods. Listen to me. I shall protect your sovereignty with *dharma*."

Arjuna laughed harshly. "What can you give me? You will die the death reserved for dogs and crows."

"You cannot move a single straw," said Rama sternly. "If you invite destruction upon yourself, who can stop you from doing so? Your grandfather invited the curse of my grandfather, Maha Atharvan. Today you are inviting my curse. You are proud of your brutal strength. You believe your will to be *dharma*." Continued Rama, his voice raised in prophetic passion: "Son of Kritavirya, I curse you....."

The hearts of the Haihayas present trembled at the

prospect of coming disaster. Sahasrarjuna raised his mace and came near Rama: "You dare curse me?"

Rama took a step forward. His eyes emitted flames which almost scorched Sahasrarjuna and he stepped back.

The voice of Rama resounded in prophetic strain: "You shall die the death of a rabid dog. Your Haihayas shall die wandering from forest to forest. Your name shall endure as the most wicked among men till the end of time. And the word of the Son of Bhrigu shall prevail."

The words came out slowly but with concentrated passion and the heart of everyone missed a beat. Arjuna looked at his men and saw that fear had gripped the heart of every Haihaya. As Rama laid the curse upon Arjuna, the sword fell from the hands of one of his men. He saw Talbahu ready to intervene in case he dealt a blow to Rama, and his mind naturally went back to the time when Bhadrashrenya had threatened to intervene on a similar occasion.

"Go your way, Arjuna," continued Rama, firm and commanding. "I came to save you, but you will not be saved. Go, sink, lower and still lower, where even a *Chandaala* cannot sink."

Sahasrarjuna's eyes went filmy. The light from Bhargava's eyes, which poured irresistible power, shook his nerves. His hand could not even hold the mace firmly. He felt his helplessness. Whenever he tried to kill Bhargava, everyone forsook him.

"Talbahu, take him away. Put him in the underground cell. See that he does not run away," said Arjuna and, breathing hard, left the place.

Talbahu took Rama to the cellar. "Gurudeva," said Talbahu, "may I loosen your bonds?"

"Just as you like," said Rama.

"If you want me, I am waiting outside," said the General.

There was an affectionate smile on the lips of Rama.

When night fell, Talbahu, accompanied by Mrigarani, whose eyes were swollen on account of constant crying, returned.

"Gurudeva, Gurudeva," she cried and clung to Rama's feet. "What have you done? You have cursed Sahasrarjuna. Don't you know that when he gets into a passion like this, he does not know what he is doing? Forgive him: please forgive him, I beg of you," and she laid her head on Rama's feet.

"Mrigarani, if a man wants to seek destruction, how can you save him?" asked Rama.

"Gurudeva, forget what he has done and forgive him. Once he cools down I shall explain everything to him. I shall fall at his feet, if necessary. So will Talbahu," sobbed Mrigarani.

"Queen," replied Bhargava, "he is *adharma* incarnate. He is doomed."

Mriga broke down. "Master, do one thing. Please go away from here. For the moment he is blind with rage, and what he may do in this state of mind, I cannot say. Save him from killing his own guru. For my sake, please. He is my life, my soul, my all. Save him. Gurudeva, please go away. I will show you the way. I fall at your feet."

Rama said: "I am his guru. He may leave me. But how can I leave him? If he kills me, then a saviour will rise from every drop of my blood."

"Oh, please. Bhagawati has already left. You also go away for a few days," cried Mriga.

"It is useless to press me, Mrigarani," said Rama. "Arjuna is a burden to the earth. He cannot be saved.



There is no way but to destroy him. Every Haihaya will be ready to take his life some day."

"That is what I am afraid of," said Mriga as she again clung to Rama's feet. "Please go away for a few days. Once he is able to control his anger, I will bring him round. Master, for my sake...."

"I won't go away like a thief," said Rama.

Mriga again entreated Rama. "Soon it will be dark. I am getting a boat ready. Please go away to Chandra Teertha. I will see that he himself invites you to Mahishmati in a few days. Have confidence in me. Even these Haihaya warriors beg of you to do the same thing. Ask Talbahu. If something happens to you, the Haihayas will rise like one man and kill him."

"Gurudeva," said Talbahu with folded hands, "we have decided that we shall not allow a hair of your head to be touched. And if the Chakravarti kills you, none of us will remain as spectators."

Arjuna, once roused to fury, was all action. He collected his most fierce and ruthless warriors and addressed them: "These Bhrigus have come here to deprive me of this kingdom. This boy is not a guru, he is our enemy. I will finish him." "Talbahu, have you locked him in?" he turned to Talbahu.

"Yes, your Majesty," replied the General.

"All right then. As soon as night falls, go round the whole city and kill every Bhrigu whom you meet. Not one man, woman or child should escape. Bhargava destroyed the Sharyatas. I will destroy the Bhrigus," shouted Sahasrarjuna.

Nobody spoke.

"Where is Guru Mrikund?" asked Arjuna after a few moments.

"He has just come in," replied Talbahu.

"Then don't touch him and his disciples though they are Bhrgus. He is my slave," said Arjuna, rubbing his hands in gleeful brutality. "Tomorrow morning they will see who Arjuna is."

In the meantime, two armed men brought Mrikund. "Welcome, Guru," said Arjuna with contempt. "You are not to leave this fortress tonight."

"And where is that Loma?" he asked of the warriors.

One of the warriors folded his hands and said: "When the General came to invite Rama, she was not there. We waited for her, but she has not yet come back."

Sahasrarjuna hit the warrior. "Why have you come back without her?" he shouted at him. "If she escapes me, I will take your life. Ruru, go and find her. I shall not let her escape me this time."

The Haihaya chiefs stood silent, uncertain, aloof. Sahasrarjuna growled at them, for he felt that, though they did not speak, they disapproved of what he was doing.

Suddenly the rays of the setting sun lit up the rampart.

"Take care. Keep this in your mind. Don't let even the name of Rama-Bhargava survive...." But before he could conclude the sentence, Sahasrarjuna, speechless, fixed his wild gaze on a distant rampart as if gone mad. Everyone turned his eyes to the spot where Arjuna had fixed his gaze.

On that rampart, which had been lit up by the rosy-coloured rays of the setting sun, they saw first a battle-axe, reflecting the sunbeams; then the matted locks; then a tall, sinewy figure.

As they looked on, they espied on the distant rampart the majestic figure of Rama, his face resplendent in the glow of the setting sun. All who saw him became transfixed. The sword fell from Arjuna's hands.

With slow steps and flaming eyes, Rama stepped down from the rampart and walked out of the fort.

Everyone there was so frightened at what they thought to be an apparition, that they could not speak a word. And dread, as of coming doom, was in every heart.

Arjuna was the first to recover self-possession. He shouted: "What are you looking at? Catch him."

Not one chief moved.

"Talbahu, go and see whether he is in the cellar or has escaped," he shouted at Talbahu.

Talbahu went towards the cellar. The others began to run hither and thither.

Sahasrarjuna ran up the steps of the rampart and, as he looked down towards the shrine, he saw the silhouette of a majestic figure slowly move down, and dazed, almost fell faint

## UNEXPECTED VISITORS

For the moment, Sahasrarjuna was very angry with everyone, particularly with Mriga. His suspicion was also aroused that she had fallen in love with the young Bhargava. This he felt as a blow. In spite of his violent and selfish temper, Mriga had been a part of himself. He had met her when she was twelve and found in her a girl who, in matters of sex, was a marvel of passion and skill, who satisfied his lust, his vanity and his need for a good counsellor. And she had stood every test. Though not married to him, she was more than a queen, a reliable friend, a wily diplomat, a Prime Minister who lived but to satisfy his Gargantuan hunger for power. But now his imagination presented pictures of the intimate relations which, he was sure, subsisted between her and Bhargava. He, therefore, decided to kill her and went in search of Mriga.

Mriga knew the savage outbursts of temper which seized Sahasrarjuna on occasions and was confident of her powers to tame the beast in him. When she heard him coming to her with hasty strides and a malicious grin, she was ready to meet him with quiet strength.

"Wicked woman! Wench! You are thinking of Rama and the time you spent with him."

"No, I am thinking of you," she said as she stood up from the little low platform on which she was sitting.

"Liar, you became the willing slave of my enemy, ready to dispose of me. Is it not? And you let him slip from my hands." Sahasrarjuna, saying so, caught hold of her hair and threw her on the ground.

Mriga knew these fits of uncontrollable rage to which

her lord was subject and had now fully recovered her self-possession. Lying on the ground, she said: "If I wanted to dispose of you, would I have waited all this time?"

"You have sold yourself to Rama. I shall take your life."

"Chakravarti, you have never found any difficulty in killing people," Mriga said, now raising herself from the ground. "How many lives have I also taken for your sake?"

The fire of jealousy in Sahasrarjuna could not easily be extinguished. "Tell me, tell me, how many days did you enjoy with Bhargava, here or elsewhere? If you tell a lie, I will pull out your tongue," he roared.

"You are blind," Mriga said.

"Tell me," said Sahasrarjuna as he slapped her.

Mriga slowly got up, adjusted her clothes as she saw that she was slowly re-acquiring her ascendancy over Arjuna. "Where are your eyes? Can't you see? Bhargava is not a man; he is as cold and passionless as alabaster; not even the fire in my blood can melt him."

Suddenly Arjuna realised the truth of what she was saying and his sense of humour was tickled at the idea that not all her charms could win Bhargava for Mriga.

"You tried, is it? And failed?" Arjuna said jeeringly.

"I will never make an attempt if I am not likely to succeed," said Mriga with contempt. "You have not known that even after so many years."

The coolness with which Mriga said this suddenly made Sahasrarjuna sober. "Oh, he spurned you with a kick, is it?" he said and laughed outright, but as he regained his usual self, he saw the irresistible charms of Mriga and his anger was dissipated.

"I have never been kicked by anyone except you," Mriga smiled in response.

"Swear by Mother Reva."

Mriga only smiled in reply, a smile enigmatic and masterful with which he was familiar and which always brought self-confidence and enthusiasm in him. "Chakravarti, when will you be mature? When will you understand things?" she asked with her eyes fixed lovingly on Arjuna. "I am prepared to swear not only by Mother Reva, but by you. You might forget whatever I am or whatever I have done for you, but can't you see this thing so obvious to everyone? You have seen the unity which subsists between Bhargava and Bhagawati Loma. You tried to disrupt it, but could not. Do you think, living in that wonderful unity, Rama would ever have relations with a prostitute like me? If your people will come to know of this suspicion of yours, they will laugh at you."

"Is this true? Do you swear by me?" asked Arjuna, a wave of emotion sweeping over him.

"Yes, by you. I wish I could win Bhargava for myself. But can't you see? Could he be won by your ageing mistress?" Mriga laughed contemptuously.

Sahasrarjuna felt small. "Then, where has he gone?"

"How do I know? You never entrusted him to me."

Sahasrarjuna was now his normal self. Mriga had won, and they spent a happy night.

In the early morning, Arjuna woke up. As was his wont, he extended his left hand towards Mriga. Yes, she was there, lying by his side. He twisted her ringlets in his fingers and his vanity was satisfied and his self-confidence was fully restored. However, when Mriga opened her eyes, her heart was in Chandra Teertha in search of Bhargava.

The wrath of Arjuna, however, descended upon the Bhrigus. He sent out his men to burn the villages wherever the Yadavas and Bhrigus lived and to kill them.



He also kept a wary eye on Mriga, Talbahu and Mrikund, lest they should be in secret alliance with Rama.

After twenty days, Mriga received the news that the boat in which Bhargava had gone to Chandra Teertha had been sunk in the river, and Bhargava and one of the crew had been seen swimming across the river to the other bank where lived the dread Aghoris. When she received the news, Mriga was stunned. No one had ever crossed to the southern bank of the river and come back alive. Fearful crocodiles lived in the river near that bank, which was covered by a dense forest in which lived the dread Aghoris who were reputed to be eating even human flesh.

Luckily, when the news arrived Arjuna was not in Mahishmati and no one knew of the terrible distress of Mriga. Mrikund and Talbahu were also unhappy, but did not know what to do. However, all the three felt that the death of Gurudeva presaged a terrible disaster.

It was some time before Mriga acquired sufficient self-control not to let anyone perceive how miserable she was. During this time the fury of Sahasrarjuna also abated. He ordered Talbahu to make a search for Bhargava. The general, without telling his master as to the fate which had overtaken Bhargava, sent out men to make a search for him.

Prateep, with his Yadavas, had settled down in the forests of the north. Vishakha was in Anarta with her father. Bhadrashrenya, Loma, Vimada and the Bhrigus, who had left the territories of Arjuna, lay hid in the forests on the banks of the Mahi, though some of them returned under different disguises to make a search of Bhargava.

Though the normal routine of her life was the same, Mriga was a different person. Her heart cried out every time she thought of Bhargava having met his end in the

forest of the Aghoris. Talbahu and the Haihayas believed that Bhargava was still alive, but she could not bring herself to believe it. One thought kept her miserable all the time: Gurudeva came to save her and she let him die. Often, in the middle of the night, when this thought oppressed her, she would shed tears.

Mriga also felt that Sahasrarjuna no longer confided in her completely. She came to know that, without telling her, he was busy raising the contingent of Tundikera warriors and the prince of that tribe, Ruru, was in his confidence. Talbahu, the Haihaya general, also felt that he and the Haihayas were no longer trusted by the Chakravarti as before and smarted under the indignity of Ruru being treated as the chief general. But he was proud of being a Haihaya, had his share in building up Haihaya supremacy and bore the indignity with great fortitude.

One day, about twelve months after Bhargava had disappeared, Mriga received a message from Mrikund asking her to come to the shrine. He was very ill and wanted to meet her. Luckily, Arjuna had gone out of Mahishmati for hunting. When she reached the *ashram* of Guru Mrikund, he was lying in bed trembling as if he had high fever. He asked everyone, except Mriga, to leave the room and then whispered in her ears: "I am dying. Yes, kill me, kill Guru Mrikund."

"What is the matter, Guruji?"

Dadhichi, the son of Mrikund, went and stood near the door so that no one could hear their conversation.

"Come near me," said Mrikund. "I want to tell you something," he said with trembling lips.

"What is the matter?"

Mrikund trembled like a leaf, glanced in all the directions with fear in his eyes and said in a very low voice: "Bhagawati and Acharya Vimada have come here. Kill

the Guru, kill the Guru, that is what everyone says," said Mrikund.

"Where are they?" asked Mriga.

"They came in the early hours of the morning. Dadhichi brought them to me. Even he, my son, is my enemy. 'Arrange a meeting between us and Mrigarani, otherwise we will kill you,' they said. Everyone wants to kill me."

Mriga smiled a little at this old man so afraid of death. "No one will kill you. Why are you afraid?"

"Even this, my son, has become their slave," said the Guru. "Oh, Lord Pashupati, have mercy on me. When shall I send them to you?"

"I will come here at midnight to meet them," said Mriga.

"Oh, Gods. Don't say so. Not here," said Mrikund.

"Don't you worry. You keep to your bed. I will meet them in the mango grove outside."

"Oh, Lord Pashupati," exclaimed Mrikund with a sigh. "Nothing but calamity has followed since Gurudeva came here."

## LOMA IN SEARCH OF RAMA

Mriga knew all the secret passages by which one could go out of the fort, as she was often in the habit of doing so without anyone knowing about it. It was therefore easy for her to go to the shrine of Pashupati at the appointed time.

When she arrived at the mango grove, two persons dressed as men came from behind a tree. Mriga immediately recognised the small, graceful but sinewy body of Bhagawati Loma and could not restrain herself. All the misery of the sleepless nights that she had passed for months assumed intensity and she broke down. Bhagawati and Vimada remained silent till she recovered her self-possession.

"Why are you here? Things are terrible here," she whispered.

"I don't care what happens to me," said Loma in a firm voice. "But what has happened to Gurudeva? I must find him out, or go to whichever world he has gone."

Mriga looked at the fiery devotion of this small woman, with a jealous eye. Lord Pashupati never gave her the privilege of giving such devotion to anyone.

"Oh Bhagawati, why have you come back? What will happen to you if you are taken captive here?" she asked.

"Where is Gurudeva?—that is what I want to know," said Loma with quiet emphasis. "If I do not find Gurudeva I had better be dead. What can Arjuna do to me? I will kill him and then die."

"Will you kill him?"

"Yes," replied Loma. "He has destroyed my life. He kidnapped me from Aryavarta. He has been thirsting

for the blood of Gurudeva. He has decided to make me a victim of his lust. Now I have made my final resolve."

"What have you resolved to do?" asked Mriga.

"For a long time I have tried to find the whereabouts of Gurudeva, but I have not succeeded. Now I have come to find him myself. It is your business to find him for me. You are his disciple," said Loma.

An unfamiliar joy sprang up in the heart of Mriga as she found herself referred to as the disciple of Bhargava by no less a person than the venerable Bhagawati herself. "What can I do? I am no better than a prisoner. Sahasrarjuna has no confidence in me," she said.

"If you don't help me, I shall have to go to Sahasrarjuna myself," said Loma in a matter-of-fact tone.

"But didn't I tell you? He will kill you."

"No. He will be consumed by his own lust. You know that he has never been able to outgrow his fascination for me. I will see that he is consumed in the fire of his own fascination," said Bhagawati.

"Will you take away even the little happiness which is left to me?" asked Mriga piteously.

"He has already taken away all my happiness. I have now only to die in a manner which befits the dignity of Gurudeva."

Mriga, feeling disturbed at this wild resolution of Loma, folded her hands. "Bhagawati, don't talk like this. I will help you in the best way I can."

"You swear by Pashupati."

"Yes, I swear not only by Pashupati, but by Gurudeva," said Mriga with folded hands. "To me there is no difference between Gurudeva and Lord Pashupati."

"Then tell me, where is he?"

"Shall I tell you the truth?" asked Mriga. "You must give up all hope of seeing Gurudeva again. After

you left Mahishmati, I set him free from the underground cellar and, in the sight of everyone, he walked away to the shrine of Pashupati. Then, as I had arranged, he left for Chandra Teertha in a boat. But he did not reach there. I got every enquiry made." Mriga broke down again. She could not bring herself to talk about Rama's death.

"Tell me whatever you know," commanded Loma. "I have steeled my heart against every disaster."

"He is no longer alive," said Mriga, sobbing. "I made every enquiry from the sailors who were in the boat. I am responsible for his death."

"What is it? Tell me," asked Loma steadily.

"When they were about to reach Chandra Teertha, one of the sailors made a hole in the boat and sunk it," continued Mriga. "Gurudeva did not know that the Aghoris lived on the opposite bank."

"What happened then?" asked Loma.

"When the other sailors came back to the Chandra Teertha side of the river, they heard weird shouts of the Aghoris on the opposite bank. Evidently Gurudeva was captured by them."

"And then?" asked Bhagawati, her heart stopping dead.

"Then—then—only Daddanath Aghori would know what happened," said Mriga.

Everyone present trembled.

"Does Daddanath Aghori live on the blood of men?" asked Vimada.

"Yes, yes. He flies in the air; he wanders from burning-ground to burning-ground; he drinks nothing but human blood."

Even the brave Loma shuddered with fright. Could she, a woman, do anything but shed tears? But the next



moment there was a spark which enkindled hope in her heart. Could her Rama die? Die, and leave her alone? Suddenly she saw before her eyes Bhargava standing victorious with his *Parashu* in his hands. "No, no, no," she said. "No one can kill Bhargava."

Even Mriga's eyes were no longer humid. She appeared to be bound with Loma by the bond of devotion.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I know, I know," said Loma. "Since his boyhood, fire has not scorched him; water has not drowned him; arms have not wounded him. Not even the malice of men has touched him," said Loma.

"I have not the faith that you have," said Mriga, but as she spoke, she felt as if she was struck dumb.

From the dark shade of the trees came the sound of sandalled feet. The darkness was lit up by a circle of dim greenish light, in which they saw Bhargava standing with his battle-axe like some insurmountable peak of the Himalayas. Mriga almost fainted. From the mouth of Loma issued but one word: 'Rama.' A little away, Mrikund who, unable to restrain his curiosity, had concealed himself behind a tree to overhear the conversation, saw the vision too and fell on the ground.

"Where can I meet Daddanath Aghori?" asked Loma suddenly.

"No one has seen him. On every dark night of the month, he comes to the burning-ground near the shrine, by crossing the river on a corpse. Next day we find a dead body lying in the compound, all blood sucked from its veins. Then we see the skull offered to Pashupati by the Aghori. This is all that we know about him," said Mriga.

"But where does he live?" asked Loma.

"Lord Pashupati alone knows," replied Mriga. "He

lives in the burning-ground—or where you hear an unearthly laughter. But his home is in the Forest of Aghōris”

“Can anyone take me to the Forest of Aghoris?” asked Loma.

“No one has known to have gone there. Mrikund might be knowing something about it.”

Mriga took them to Mrikund, who said: “If you stand on the bank of Mother Reva, you will see a mountain in the far east. The Aghorvana is situated at its foot. You cannot reach there by the river, for a thousand crocodiles guard it. You cannot go there by land because a hundred thousand ghouls bar the way.” Guru spoke in frightened accents. “Whenever I hear the name of Daddanath, I fear death. Once only I saw the corpse from which blood had been sucked by Daddanath. I was then so frightened that I was prostrate with fever for twenty-one days.”

“Will my Rama be there with him?” asked Loma.

“If he is anywhere alive, he would be with Daddanath.”

“How does Daddanath come here?” asked Loma.

“He walks on the waters of the river. Some men have seen him coming here that way.”

“Then I must find out Daddanath Aghori.”

“What madness! No one has ever seen Daddanath Aghori and come out alive.”

“I don’t want to come out alive,” said Loma. “If my Rama is alive, I will find him. If his blood has gone into the veins of Daddanath, I want that mine should join his there.”

## CHAPTER LXV

### DADDANATH AGHORI

Loma spent a day or two in the *ashram* of Mrikund. Her companion was Acharya Vimada. They had disguised themselves as beggars. But Mrikund was frightened lest they should be recognized. Taking pity on him Mriga made arrangements for their stay in a village on the outskirts of the city of Mahishmati. Loma made up her mind to find Rama by establishing contact with Daddanath Aghori.

Vimada had given up hope long ago. But the mind of Loma had not despaired yet. There was just a single thread of hope on which hung the life of Bhagawati Loma. Someone had told her that among the group of aghoris there had been seen a man who was fair and tall and quite unlike any aghori. She felt it in her bones that it must be Rama and she wanted to know more about the haunts of Daddanath.

Mrikund was sure of one fact: every morning after the new moon, in the burning grounds adjoining the city, a strange sight would always be seen. There was a raised platform, on which would be placed the skull of a human being — an offering to Lord Pashupati. Very near the platform would be found the body of a human being, its head severed from the body by claws. This was the only clue to the fact that Daddanath Aghori was in the habit of visiting Lord Pashupati with an offering on the night of the new moon.

Loma decided to learn the lore of the aghoris. Mrigarani helped her to get a tutor, Dadhichi, who taught her the many rituals which they were wont to perform. He was amazed at the intense concentration of this young

woman. He had never seen the like of her before. She was his best disciple. In the middle of the night, Loma, her form trembling with cold and with fear, would visit the burning ground attired as a man. She would perform *pooja* to the skulls from the burning bodies and worship the heaps of ashes which were piled on high. These were some of the many rites of the aghoris.

Vimada was desperate. He thought that the great Daddanath could be won over and that he would lead them to Rama was just a fond hope. His Aryan mind looked with disdain and contempt on the barbaric rites which Loma was learning. He considered it beneath the dignity of a man like him to stoop to them and he refused to learn them. Besides, he did not have any hope of Rama being alive. He tried his level best to make Loma abandon her quest. But she was firm. Every night she went to the burning grounds and he would accompany her. He would wait for her to finish her terrible worship and take her back.

Loma's mind was wholly absorbed in what she was doing. From the moment she woke in the morning her lips would murmur, 'Rama! Rama!' It would seem as though she saw him with her eyes and felt his presence by her side, all the time. At night, when she was in the burning grounds she would envision his glowing form in front of her. When her entire body trembled while performing some particularly terrible ritual she felt him very near her giving her courage and calm. Slowly but surely her fears would melt away because she felt him near her.

Vimada was frightened to see this change in Loma. Nightfall would transform her completely. She changed into man's attire. At her waist she would tie a *chakra* and wear a sword by her side. She would carry a small battle-axe in her hand. Thus dressed and equipped, she

would look as though she were going out with Bhargava. That was how Vimada would feel, looking at her.

Loma went to the burning grounds on the dark and dreadful night of the new moon. There was a tree dense with branches and leaves. She ascended the tree and hid herself among its branches. The night was silent. Nothing could be heard except the flow of the water in the river Reva. The dark waves of the river were flowing slowly. The stars, reflected therein, looked like a thousand fireflies and the glow made the darkness lift a little. At a distance the fort of Arjuna loomed like a dense cloud. The pillar near the shrine of Pashupati stood in lone splendour. In the stillness of the night even the gentle lapping of the waves of the river made a frightening noise. Loma was terrified. The slight trembling of a leaf in the breeze made her shiver with fright. The only reason why she did not fall from the tree was because she had tied herself firmly to a branch.

Some time passed. All of a sudden, she heard a noise from the direction of the river. In the faint light of the stars Loma saw a figure swimming across. The swimmer reached the bank. Loma went cold when she saw the form. It did not look human, but a quadruped. It leaped out of the water on all fours and ran towards the pillar near the shrine. It walked about near the shrine and returned. Then it climbed the platform and stood there. Loma felt that she could not breathe. She saw that it was not an animal after all, but a man. He was short and thick and his chest was immense. His long locks and beard hid his face completely. He held a human skull in his hand and this he placed on the platform. He fell on the ground three times paying obeisance to the Lord. He stood silent for a while as though he were contemplating to return.

Suddenly he looked around and began to sniff the air. His suspicions had been aroused. He threw a glance at the tree in which Loma was hidden. He let out a terrible screech and then dropping on all fours once again, he leaped down from the platform, scurried to the bank of the river like an animal and jumped into the water. His blood-curdling cry still resounded in Loma's ears. It was all she could do to stop herself from screaming in fear. Exhausted, she spent the rest of the night on the tree.

Early in the morning people came to the river for their morning ablutions. With her courage returned, she descended from the tree and walked towards the shrine. There she found Vimada. He was holding fast to a pillar and he was paler than the whitest wisp of cotton. "Bhagawati. You are still alive!" he exclaimed in wonder.

She looked around and found a body with its head severed.

"What happened?" she asked Vimada.

"It was the God of Fire who saved me" said Vimada. "I was near the pillar waiting for you to come back. Suddenly I saw a huge jackal. It had long black hair on its head and face. It took this body and with its claws severed the head from the body and stripped it of skin and flesh to the bone. Taking the skull it scampered away. Look, the headless body is still here!"

Both looked at the body for a long time. Finally Loma spoke with a tremor in her voice, "Vimada, it was not an animal. It was the dreaded Daddanath Aghori himself. He brought the skull to the shrine and offered it to Lord Pashupati."

Her head was spinning. She caught hold of Vimada's hand and stopped herself from falling. Both of them walked away slowly from the dreadful scene.



## CHAPTER LXVI

### ARJUNA IS INTERESTED

Bhagawati was firm in her resolve to please and win over Daddanath Aghori. On the night of the new moon, on the other bank of the Narmada, she hid in a tree, with Vimada and three Bhrigus as her companions. They were scared out of their wits but Loma was composed. She was set on meeting Daddanath with the object of finding the whereabouts of Rama.

She had performed the Aghori rites before climbing up the tree. With crimson powder she had drawn the aghor *chakra*, the symbol of the clan, on sand, then heaped some crimson flowers in the centre of the circle, and on top of the flowers placed a skull. All around, the trees waved fiercely in the wind. From a distance could be heard the howls and moanings of beasts of prey. Even the low murmur of the river sounded frightening in the dark. But Loma, obsessed with the thought of reunion with her Bhargava, continued to pray to the guru of the aghoris.

A little before midnight, a short, squat form paddled out of the river. It was the dreaded Daddanath. Returning from his usual ritual, when he was very near the bank, Daddanath suddenly began to look around and to sniff the air. His roving eyes, glowing like live coals, alighted on the tree in which one of the men was hiding. Then they saw the aghor *chakra* which had been drawn on the ground and he let out an unearthly yell. Hearing it the man screamed in terror, his hands lost their hold and he fell unconscious to the ground. Daddanath ran to him on all fours. He sniffed him and finding him unconscious, carried him in his arms and laid him beside the *chakra*.

The unconscious man regained his senses. Screaming in mortal fear he ran from the spot. In two leaps Daddanath overtook him and caught him. His long claws were buried in the neck of the victim, stifling his last cries. In a trice the head was separated and flung away from the body.

Daddanath stood up. He went near the water and made eerie noises, interspersing them with howls like a jackal's. A huge crocodile came out of the water. Daddanath pushed the headless body with his foot towards the crocodile. Like a dog catching a piece of meat, the crocodile caught the body between its jaws and slipped back into the river. The other Bhrigus, in their fright, jumped down from their perches in the trees and ran in all directions screaming wildly. Daddanath turned his glowing eyes on them, but with a scornful laugh he went back to the river and vanished out of sight. Vimada became unconscious.

Early in the morning they all returned to Mahishmati in a boat. One of the Bhrigus had become mad. Vimada had high fever and was delirious. Loma seemed to be in a trance in which she saw and conversed with her Bhargava.

The next new moon was fast approaching. Kurma and Loma were conferring as to how they could placate Daddanath. Kurma finally said, "The best way is to bring about a quarrel between Sahasrarjuna and Daddanath." Kurma, disguised as a fisherman, went to meet the king. After great difficulty he managed to get an interview. He said:

"My lord, in the forest where the aghoris dwell there has appeared a new guru. He is fair and tall. I have seen him on moonlit nights." Arjuna was suddenly interested.

"Has he anything in his hand?"

"Yes, my lord. Something which looks like an axe".

"Do his eyes shine in the night?"

"Oh yes, my lord! They are like the eyes of a tiger."

Arjuna felt as though someone had hit him on the heart. He realized that his enemy was still very much alive.

"How do you know all this?" he asked the fisherman. "I have seen him. He comes to the banks of the Reva with Daddanath Aghori".

He paused. Arjuna's face paled. Noticing it, Kurma went on with folded hands and bowed head, "They say that Daddanath has accepted him as his guru and that these two have decided to kill you. I have come to warn you at great risk to my life because I owe you a debt of gratitude."

The king was silent for a while. He removed a bracelet from his arm and threw it to the fisherman.

"Take that. Tell me, do you know where this aghori lives?"

"I know just this. On the night of the new moon Daddanath Aghori comes to the temple of Pashupati to offer a skull. I have a feeling that he will then try to harm you".

Sahasrarjuna was again silent for a while. Then he asked, "Do you know Daddanath?"

"I do not know him. But I have seen him. I can recognise him."

"You must come then. On the night of the new moon take my men with you and point him out to them."

Kurma agreed and went away. Sahasrarjuna sat for a long time, immersed in thought.

## CHAPTER LXVII

### LOMA MEETS DADDANATH

The night of the new moon came round again. After performing the usual rites Loma ascended the tree and waited for Daddanath to appear.

Meanwhile Kurma had met Sahasrarjuna, who had deputed Taladhvaja, the adventurous son of Talbahu, commander of the king's army, to slay Daddanath. Taking a trustworthy assistant with him, Taladhvaja hid behind a tree.

Loma was not frightened in the least. She had made up her mind to sacrifice herself, if need be, for the sake of her lord. It was close to midnight. Daddanath loped along the bank of the river, and climbed the platform. He looked around and sniffed the air. Then he stood on his legs and turning in the direction of the tree in which Loma was seated, laughed with pleasure.

Just as he stooped to eat the sacrificial food Loma had placed for him, Taladhvaja and his companion rushed at him. Howling like a jackal, Daddanath jumped into the air. Loma leaped down from the tree and with her axe she beheaded the soldier. Taladhvaja ran away.

Loma prostrated in the direction of the platform and lay still on the ground, expecting every moment the claws of Daddanath to be buried in her neck. Daddanath, however, was busy offering the skull of the man who had been just killed to Pashupati. He sniffed the air again and with a sudden shout of joy he ran on all fours in the direction which Taladhvaja had taken.

In the morning Taladhvaja was found dead in his house. His head had been severed and the blood had been sucked from the veins — clear evidence that he had

been killed by Daddanath. Arjuna was sure that the other man had been killed by Bhargava since an axe had been used.

Arjuna was having sleepless nights. After the tragic death of his warriors on the cremation ground no one was prepared to face Daddanath.

Loma had made it a habit to visit the grounds every night. She would make offerings of food and flowers and pray aloud, so that the aghoris could hear. "Guru Daddanath, your life is in danger. Come and meet me."

For two nights Loma heard scratchings on the door of her house. On the third night she opened the door. Daddanath entered on his hands and feet. He was short and enormously broad in the chest. His arms were long. Two fangs protruded from his mouth. He was about fifty years of age in appearance. He sniffed the air as was his habit and then spoke to her in a thick voice:

"Was that you sitting on the tree near the platform three months ago?"

"Yes."

"You crossed over to the other bank on the next new moon?"

"Yes."

"On the night of the last new moon a man was killed. Was it you who killed him?"

"Yes."

"Are you the one who draws the aghora *chakra*?"

"Yes."

"I am pleased with you and your devotion. You may ask a boon of me", said Daddanath. He laughed with contempt as he added, "You human beings, do you do any good without some selfish end in view? You kill one another, hurt one another, starve one another, all out of selfishness!"

"My lord," said Loma humbly, "I have nothing to ask of you: you need grant me no boon. I just wanted to warn you. Please do not go near the temple on the next night of the new moon. Sahasrarjuna wants to kill you. I am sure of that."

"I will go! I have never missed an *amavasya*."

"But he is sure to kill you!"

"This human race is contemptible. What harm have I done to the king that he should want to kill me?"

"He believes that you are out to kill him."

"Why should I? It is true that once a month I offer human sacrifice to my deity. And I revenge myself on anyone who kills a member of my clan. But not otherwise. It is only human beings who kill senselessly."

"You are not a human being? You are not of this world?" asked Loma wonderingly.

"I? A human being?" Daddanath laughed loudly. "I am an aghori. I will not even touch a human being: they are all sinful."

"Have you ever met a human being who is good?" asked Loma eagerly.

Daddanath smiled and said, "Yes. There is one good man."

"Who is he?"

Loma hung on his answer between hope and despair.

Just then, outside footsteps were heard approaching. Daddanath leaped to the roof and removed the tiles which covered it.

"I will meet you again on the next *amavasya* night," said Daddanath as he vanished through the opening he had made.

Sahasrarjuna was passing terrified nights. He was always with Mrigarani. He posted guards all around his sleeping chambers and alerted them on the slightest



noise. One morning, when he got up he saw on the floor a small circle drawn in crimson powder. No one knew how it came there.

Following this incident, the entire city of Mahishmati was full of rumours, of talk that the end of Sahasrarjuna was drawing near. He was desperate. The comforting words of Mriga served only to enrage him. He ordered an elaborate worship of Pashupati and tied around his neck a tiny image of the deity. He paced his royal chamber in distress.

In the evening he went to the mansion of Mriga. He took all precautions and went to bed. His guards were stationed all about the palace. He kept all his weapons by his bedside, within easy reach. Far into the night he kept up a conversation with Mriga. At last, after midnight, they fell to sleep.

Arjuna dreamt that he was walking on the terrace. The clouds had covered the sky and the air was still. A cat jumped the walls of the fort. He threw a weapon at the cat, but missed, and the animal jumped at his throat. Suddenly the king sat up in his bed. A terrified scream came from his lips. Mriga came panting to see what the matter was. The guards rushed in. Arjuna shouted, pointing to the floor, "Look! Look!" A tiny aghora *chakra* was drawn at the foot of his bed. He felt under his pillow and found that the image of Pashupati was gone!

## CHAPTER LXVIII

### MRIGA'S PLEA

Loma went disguised to the court of Arjuna. Mriga and Mrikund recognised her. Mrikund asked, "My child, have you met Daddanath Aghori?"

"I have worshipped him."

"What is he like?"

"He is like no one we have seen."

"Can you meet him?"

"Only if he is pleased with me."

"If you do, will you give him a message from the king?"

"If it is fit for his ears I will tell him."

"Tell him that the king is pleased with him."

"Daddanath hates human beings. He cares not if the king is pleased with him or not."

Arjuna intervened, "I will give him anything he desires. I will give him heaps of gold."

"He values the ashes of the burning grounds more than your gold."

"Why does he harass me?" asked the king in a pained voice.

"He only punishes those who persecute the innocent and betray their guru."

"What wrong have I done him?"

"Lord, if you will forgive me, may I speak frankly?"

Mrikund interposed, "Speak without fear."

"I have not heard him directly, but it is said that he is angry with you. He believes that you destroy the innocent, harm women and children and kill the priests."

For a moment Arjuna's face went red with anger, but the next moment it was pale with fear. He placed a

hand on his brow in despair. Mrikund said, "My child, you must talk to Daddanath. Tell him to be kind. The king will mend his ways. I promise."

Arjuna walked away taking Talbahu with him.

Mrigarani fell at the feet of Loma and said, "What can we do? My life and my happiness are threatened now. These last few days have made my lord mad. What shall we do?"

Loma's voice was harsh and unrelenting.

"What about the many whom he has driven mad? He has made me mad too!"

"Don't forget, it was I who engineered the escape of your lord Bhargava," said Mriga.

"I do not want to take away your happiness. I will talk to Daddanath about you. As for my lord, he will himself tell you about everything when you meet him."

"Is Gurudeva alive then? Has he been found?" asked Mriga eagerly.

"There is no man born or is yet to be born who can kill him."

"Where is he?"

"What will you do if you know where he is? You can do nothing. Let me tell you one thing. If the king wants to be left alone he has to make one promise; that he will no more try to harass the aghoris of the Bhrigus."

"If he gives that promise, will Daddanath leave him in peace?"

"We will see. First let me get the promise of the king so that I can convey it to Daddanath."

A little while later Mrikund came back from the king. He assured her that the king had given his promise.

The queen fell at the feet of Loma. "I beseech you, let no harm come to my Arjuna."

"If he keeps his promise."

## CHAPTER LXIX

### BHARGAVA AND DADDANATH

It was past midnight. A pale moon faintly lit the dark sky. On the river Chandra Teertha a lone craft was sailing leisurely, its progress helped by the high tide. Some of the sailors were fast asleep, some others were dozing.

Bhargava, who was sleeping at one end of the boat, was suddenly awake. He heard a faint sound coming from the other end. It was the sound of someone boring a hole in the bottom of the boat, which came distinctly to Bhargava's sharp ears. A sailor was bending over the hole.

Bhargava sat up erect. The boring stopped and was replaced by the gurgling of the water of the river as it entered the boat through the hole. In one bound Bhargava went up to the sailor and caught him by the scruff of his neck. "Scoundrel" he shouted. "Are you scuttling the boat?"

Everyone was awake. The hole became large and the water came rushing in. Bhargava lifted the offending sailor bodily and threw him into the river. The boat teetered crazily and was about to capsize. Everyone of the sailors jumped into the river. Many of them swam towards the north bank and reached it safely.

A sailor hit Bhargava on the head from behind. He grappled with the man, the boat turned on its side, and Bhargava and the sailor fell into the water, still locked in combat. Bhargava swam towards the south bank which was nearer. The sailor swam behind him and caught his ankle to drown him. But with a strong kick he released his foot and swam ashore, holding his axe aloft to keep it dry.

Reaching the shore, he saw five or six crocodiles on the sand. Hearing the noise he had made they slipped silently into the water. The sailor who was swimming behind him stood up in the shallow waters. Suddenly Bhargava heard a scream. One of the crocodiles had opened its jaws wide open and was trying to catch the man. Bhargava flung his axe at it. It caught the crocodile between the jaws. The animal stopped and dived into the water. A moment later the river was red with its blood. Bhargava caught hold of the stupefied man by the hand and dragged him out. He said without rancour, "Jyamadha, this is the third time you have tried to kill me. Can you not forget our enmity?" Jyamadha fell to the ground at his feet and begged for forgiveness.

From the jungle beyond the bank there came the howling of hundreds of jackals.

"What is that noise?" asked Bhargava.

"My lord, this is the living place of the dreaded aghoris. I tried to scuttle the boat to save you because I know we can never escape from here. Daddanath guru lives here and he will kill us. Let us escape."

"No, let us wait and see what happens," said Bhargava and stood there unafraid.

A horde of aghoris rushed towards them with weapons made of the bones of animals. They saw the two men and bound them with ropes. Bhargava helped them to tie him up and said, "I will not run away. Take me wherever you want to."

He smiled and some of them grinned back. They took the two men to their abode in a clearing in the forest and tied them to two trees. They tortured them for days together but Bhargava did not protest nor did he show that he was suffering pain. Jyamadha found the torture and pain unbearable and often fainted.

Eight days later their guru Daddanath came. He looked at them with angry eyes and said, "You wicked human beings."

Bhargava smiled and said, "Many are wicked but not all."

"Why did you come here then?"

"Ask Jayamadha who brought me here."

Jayamadha related everything. Daddanath spat on him.

"Lying, revengeful, murderous, hateful mankind," he exclaimed.

"You are mistaken. You too are human!"

"No. I am an aghori."

"Are there no revengeful, lying and cruel aghoris?"

"No. We are straightforward and honest," said Daddanath proudly.

"Many human beings are also like that," said Bhargava.

"Perhaps." Daddanath's face held a sneer.

"I have but one request," said Bhargava in a gentle voice. "Please untie us. There are festering wounds on our bodies and lice in our hair. I have got to have a bath."

"You are trying to run away."

"Why should I run away?" asked Bhargava in surprise.

"I can drink the blood of anyone," said Daddanath proudly.

"But why should you drink blood? There are many things which you can eat. If you are a guru, I am also descended from gurus."

"Are you also a guru?"

"Yes."

"Can you fly in the air?"

"No."



"Can you walk on water?"

"No."

"Can you see in the dark?"

"Oh yes!" said Bhargava with a smile. "That I can do."

"That is a lie."

"You can test me tonight."

Daddanath's son Bhadrath intervened and said, "It is true, father. He is like you and me. He can see in the dark."

Daddanath pondered for a moment and said, "You cannot fly in the air. You cannot walk on the water. You cannot drink blood. How can you be a guru?"

"Because I can do what you cannot do," said Bhargava in a calm voice.

"What can you do?"

"I can give you food which is better than yours. I can cure the diseases from which your people are suffering. I can give education to your people."

"Education? What is that?"

"Your weapons are not efficient enough," continued Bhargava. "I can teach you to make better ones. I can kill animals more easily than you can. With my arts I can teach you a better and nobler way of living. I can make you powerful and pure. I can make you understand the qualities of an Aryan."

Daddanath and his aghoris laughed loudly.

Bhargava said, "Please ask them to release me from these bonds."

"You are trying to run away."

"I am not a fool to think of running away. How can I? The river is full of crocodiles. The forest is full of wild beasts of prey. There is just one way for me to

run away from here and that is through the doorway of your heart."

Daddanath was pleased. He allowed him to be released. At Bhargava's pleading he released Jyamadha also.

Bhargava spent a year and a half with the aghoris. Within that time he had won the heart of every individual there. They were simple-hearted people and he grew to love them. All that he promised to Daddanath, he did for them. They now had better weapons. They had learnt cleanliness. Once they had all laughed at Bhargava since he bathed three times a day. But they learnt to be clean. He taught them the art of healing too. Once Bhargava had a chance to cure the nephew of Daddanath and ever since then he became one of them. They felt that his art was worth learning and he became the favourite of all. Daddanath grew so fond of him that he adopted him as his son.

Several of the women had become enamoured of him, particularly, the younger sister of Daddanath. She wanted to marry him. She tried her best to make him take her. But he smilingly told her that he had a wife already.

He was very happy in the midst of the aghoris. So passed a year and a half.

## CHAPTER LXX

### LOMA FINDS RAMA

King Arjuna announced throughout his kingdom that the aghoris should not be molested. Guru Mrikund prepared another amulet for him. The next four or five days were peaceful. There was no sign of the dreaded Daddanath and the king felt secure. His pride and courage came back to him.

Arjuna became immersed in thought. He, the lord of the three worlds, the vanquisher of the king of Lanka, had been trembling all these days like a timid little girl. He had fallen so low as to find refuge in the courage of a woman — Mrigarani! Frightened by this demon in human form he had given a rash promise. Arjuna was ashamed of himself. His fear had vanished. He was angry with Daddanath for having reduced him to that state. He had to be punished. Arjuna told himself that he would go to the burning grounds on the night of the new moon and kill that hated Daddanath.

He spoke to no one about it. When the night of the new moon drew near, the king took a faithful palace guard with him as his companion. He told him that he and Daddanath had become friends and they were now going to meet him. The soldier was made to wait behind a boulder by the edge of the river and the king went near the platform. He wanted to see how the aghori guru came and what he did.

Swimming the river, Daddanath came ashore. He smelt the presence of a human being. The soldier saw him and came out of his hiding place to inform the king. Daddanath ran behind him on all fours, jumped on his back and killed him in the usual manner. He took the

skull and went to the platform to offer it to the Lord.

Loma was standing there with her palms pressed together. Daddanath saw her and shouted in glee. He was pleased to see her. He made the offering to the Lord and came back to where she was.

"What brings you here, my child?" he asked her.

"My lord, Sahasrarjuna has sent a message. He wants you to be compassionate. He wants to be friends with you."

"Can a being of the human race ever be friend to another?"

"He is prepared to give you anything, even gold."

"I am not a human to covet gold!" said Daddanath indignantly.

"He has promised that he will never more harass the innocent."

"That is a false promise," said Daddanath with a laugh.

"His queen Mrigarani is a wise woman. She has given me her word too."

"If they leave me and my aghoris alone in peace, that is enough for me. I do not wish to enter his sinful world."

"My lord," said Loma in a soft voice, "the other day you asked me if I had any desire."

"I told you that all human beings are selfish! All right, tell me what you want from me."

"May I ask you something?"

"Ask anything you like. You are good, like an aghori woman."

Her voice trembled. Tears filled her eyes. She said, "My lord, a year and a half ago, did any human being enter your land?"

"Many people come. Some of them are eaten by the

crocodiles. Others die of other causes. It is so hard to remember."

The tears trickled down her cheeks. "I am not speaking of any man. This man is different. He is very handsome and impressive. Fear has never touched him. He is like a youthful Pashupati. Like you, his eyes can pierce the dark..." She broke down and sobbed without restraint.

"Yes, oh! yes!" said Daddanath. "He is not a man. No, he is not a man!"

She covered her eyes with her hands. Daddanath went on, "He walks like an elephant. He is glorious like a lion. Bhargavanath is not a human being. He is an aghori. He is my son."

"Your son!"

"The Reva once claimed a son from me. She gave me another and that is Bhargavanath."

"That is the man I spoke of — Ram Bhargava," said Loma.

"How do you know?" asked Daddanath in surprise.

Sobbing, Loma fell at his feet and implored, "My lord, please, please take me to him. That is all I want."

Daddanath pondered for a moment and said, "Why should I? Bhargavanath is my son. He belongs to me."

"My lord, I am the bride of your son." And she sobbed loudly.

He laughed with delight and jumped in the air. He said, "Wait for ten days more. I will bring him to you. He will be restored to you. I will bring him to your house." He laughed again and said, "I found a son and I have now found a wife for my son!"

He turned to go. Loma said, "I will walk with you to the bank of the river."

As they neared the river, Daddanath sniffed and said,

"There is someone hiding here. I can smell him."

Loma turned round and took the discus which she had fastened to her waist. Suddenly Sahasrarjuna rushed on Daddanath with his mace uplifted. Loma took a step backward and threw the discus at him. The mace dropped from his hand. He roared with anger and took a sword in his left hand. Loma took up her sword and got ready to fight him. He was taken aback for a moment. Daddanath let out a howl like a jackal's and stood on all fours. The swords clashed. Sparks flew from them and in a moment Loma's sword flew from her hand. Daddanath leaped on Arjuna's back and his long claws felt for his throat. Every muscle in the body of Arjuna was straining to fight this terror and kill him. His ears were pierced by the screams of Daddanath.

The king fell on the ground. The claws of Daddanath were nearly buried in his neck. Loma rushed to him and said, "My lord! Please spare him. I have promised to his queen that he will not be killed." Daddanath withdrew his hands but he beat Arjuna into unconsciousness. He rose and walked towards the water.

Loma had been hurt by Arjuna's sword. Her head was spinning. Daddanath saw her falling. He ran to her and lifted her up and sprinkled water on her face to revive her.

Arjuna recovered consciousness. He got up, took up his sword and again rushed towards Daddanath, who was standing in the water with Loma in his arms. He saw Daddanath springing into the air. The sight so unnerved him that the sword dropped from his listless fingers. Daddanath walked backward across the river still holding Loma in his arms. Sahasrarjuna dropped down on the ground, unconscious.

Early in the morning the aghori clan had gathered



on the other bank of the river waiting for the return of Daddanath from his worship of Pashupati. Soon they spied him coming towards them. He was not alone. They saw that he had a woman in his arms. Everyone was tense with curiosity. Would the guru bring a live human being?

Daddanath jumped ashore. Raising the form aloft he shouted with happiness, "I have brought a bride! A bride!"

"For whom?" they asked.

"For Bhargavanath," he answered.

Bhargava realised who it was and he leaped forward. Taking Loma in his arms he with ecstasy cried, "Loma! Loma!". Loma opened her eyes, saw Bhargava and embraced him. Joy and relief were mingled in her crying.

## CHAPTER LXXI

### MRIGA BECOMES BHARGAVI

In a desolate village on the outskirts of Mahishmati there was a small house. Inside it burnt a tiny lamp. Outside it two men with drawn swords were hidden among the bushes.

In the lobby of the house sat an old man. Inside, in a small courtyard Mrigarani was seated on a beautiful deerskin, waiting for someone. She was restless and worried.

Mrigarani had changed. There were no ornaments adorning her body. She always looked beautiful in her silks and jewels. Today she had abandoned them, but even without them, her natural beauty shone through the proud curve of her lips, the arrogant lift of her neck, the curve of her shoulders and her full rounded breasts.

Mrigarani was the consort of Sahasrarjuna and yet she sought refuge in this lonely little house. Except Mrikund and a few confidants, none knew about this retreat. Whenever cares of the kingdom weighed heavily upon her or when she wanted discussions to be held in secret, she came to this house.

She looked at every wall, every dear corner of the house as if she were saying a sad and loving farewell. Her head was spinning with just one worried thought: "Will he come? What if he doesn't?" Often she longed to stand at the door to await his coming, but she restrained herself and sat where she was. She had made up her mind that she would go to him if he did not come, to see him just once more, for one last moment.

She heard steps outside and stood up trembling. Mrikund entered, followed by Bhargava carrying a battle-

axe. He had grown darker and thinner too. She threw herself at his feet with a sob.

"Bless me, my lord," she faltered.

"May you live a hundred autumns!" said Bhargava. He looked around and said in amazement, "Mrigarani, what brings you here?"

"This is my house. Here Sahasrarjuna has no place. Here I stay alone, shorn of royal pomp."

"Mrigarani, you seem to be suffering."

"Yes, my lord. I am in deep trouble. Forgive me for sending for you through Daddanath. I face a grave peril."

Bhargava smiled gently and said, "Tell me."

"Arjuna has become mad."

"I knew that long ago."

"Not like what you think, my lord. One night he returned home wounded and ever since then he talks of nothing but destroying everything and everybody. He has ceased to listen to me or to guru Mrikund. He is planning to set the whole world afire."

"What are his plans?"

"He is determined to annihilate all the Yadavas and Bhrigus."

Bhargava's eyes became red and fierce.

She continued, "He has collected a huge army to march against the Yadavas. I have made arrangements for a horse to take you. Please go now and warn the Yadavas, before it is too late."

Mrikund intervened, "My lord, it is not safe for you to remain here. In all these years, I have never known Arjuna to be so fierce. It would have been better if he had been killed by Daddanath."

"He is alive because Loma pleaded with Daddanath

to spare him," said Bhargava. "You are right, I must go now and warn the Yadavas. I will meet you again. Mriga, you have bound me to you with a slender thread."

Mriga's eyes filled. She joined her palms together and said, "You are my guru, my lord, you have sanctified me with your presence. I do not think I will ever meet you again. I know that I will not see the sun rise tomorrow."

Bhargava was startled. "What makes you say that?"

"Sahasrarjuna has lost all faith in me. He does not trust me any more."

"Why?"

"He is convinced that I was responsible for the escape of Bhadrashrenya and you. My time is nearing. I know it."

"You mean, he will kill you?"

"There is no doubt about it."

"Then come with me. I will take you away from danger."

"My lord, do you think I have lived all these days without thinking on it? I know that I have a place in your heart. You will never forsake a devotee."

"Come away with me then," said Bhargava eagerly.

Mriga shook her head sadly. "Can you not see that I cannot leave him and come? Arjuna is wicked. He is cruel and he is ungrateful. But, my lord, his life and mine are mingled together. I knew no father or mother. Ever since I can remember I have lived a life of sin. I have catered to the lust of men. Old men, middle aged men, young men and even boys have been attracted by me and like moths that flirt with flame they have been burnt in the passion of my body. But I am not a harlot. When I give, I give myself completely, body and soul.

I have wound myself like a creeper around him. I do not like to leave him."

Bhargava looked at her affectionately. She spoke on, "I have given Arjuna everything ever since he was fifteen. I have given him my youth, my fire, my strength. For his sake I have conspired and killed. Often he has thrashed me. Twice he tried to poison me. To take his life is an easy matter for me, but no — I can't. He is too much of a part of me: his selfishness, his cruelty, every fibre of his being is a part of my life. Without him I am like one dead. I have slept with many for a moment's pleasure, but his embrace means everything to me. How can I leave him?"

"Mriga," said Rama gently, "You may have wallowed in the mire all these years, but today you have realised your self. Leave him and come with me to the hermitage of my father. You will become pure like gold."

Mrikund said, "I have been telling her again and again to go with you."

"No! No!" said Mriga. "I can't. I have no strength left in me. To go with you I should have youth, I should have ideals. Forgive me. When I move in the world of fancy created by you, I see you as a lover. But, lord, I have no courage left in me."

The look she turned on Bhargava was full of pain and anguish. Bhargava smiled shyly. His benevolence enveloped her. She continued, "I have dedicated everything to Sahasrarjuna; what I have suffered for him I have suffered for no other mortal. But this sacrifice has left me weak and tired. I have lost all strength I had. By giving everything to him I have lost everything."

"Mriga, I can see your suffering and I can understand it. But can you not see that Arjuna will kill you? I

will treat you as my elder sister. I will help you shed your sins as a snake sheds its skin. Come with me."

"No, please do not tempt me, my lord. I am not a fool. I may be love-mad but not love-blind. I once had hopes of living with you, of enjoying and making you enjoy undreamt of pleasures. I had hopes of melting the cold blood in your veins with the fire of my passion. But they were just dreams. You are chaste as the rising sun and I am in the darkness of hell."

Bhargava smiled, said nothing.

"I am still beautiful. Look at my face, my arms, the shapeliness of my limbs! They are still beautiful and young. They can still inspire passion, but I have lost my will to attract. I have been drained of all fire, all passion. You call me your sister, what greater honour can I have? I am grateful."

"I mean it, Mriga. I mean it. It's not an empty promise," said Bhargava.

"I know it. But I do not want to be your elder sister. I shall become old and manage your *ashram* and be a governess to your children. I shall spend my life serving the monks in the *ashram*. But, my lord," tears choked her voice, "I am not made that way. I am not born for this cold snowy peace and the arid dignity of it. I can never be the queen of a god-like man like you, there can never be any place for me in your world. These honours do not comfort me. I was born here; I bloomed here; I will wither away here."

She cupped her face in her hands and wept hot tears.

"My dear sister," said Bhargava, "fate may have ordained you to suffer, but now you have learned to see the truth."

Mriga raised her eyes to him. Her face was now in



repose. She said, "My lord, I am certain that tonight Sahasrarjuna will kill me. If I survive, I will see you again, but I know that day will never come. I was sorely tempted, but I did not wish to defile your image. I am a sinner and a sinner like me has no place in the land of the Manes. If I am a sister to you, will you listen to a sister's behest?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Cleanse me! Purify me! I am an orphan. Please lead me to the home of your ancestors."

Mriga laid her head on his feet. Bhargava placed his hand on her head with affection.

Overcome with devotion, she took both his hands in hers and pressed them to her eyes. Very tenderly Bhargava pushed back her hair from her forehead and raised her face. With her eyes half closed, drooping with love, she was lost in the ecstasy of his touch.

"Mriga, you will have to do severe penance to enter the home of my ancestors. Will you have the strength to do it?"

"Yes."

"Unless and until Sahasrarjuna weds you, you must not let him touch you."

"I will not let him touch me," said Mriga in an impassioned voice.

Bhargava asked Mrikund to light a fire. He performed a sacrifice to the Manes. He placed Mrigarani by his side and led her through the rites of purification. Then he invoked his ancestors: "O Bhrigus! O souls of my departed ancestors! I, Rama Bhargava, pray to you to accept this woman into your fold. I, your son, request you to accept my plea."

He took Mriga's left hand in his and poured oblations

into the fire.

The flames rose high. Before their astonished eyes Mrikund and Mriga saw in the glowing flames Mriga seated in the midst of the embodied forms of the dead ancestors.

The ceremony was over. Mriga had become a Bhargavi.

A smile lit up the face of Mriga. She prostrated before him.

Bhargava said, "Mrikund, you have a small dagger with you. Give it to Mriga." He turned to her, "Mriga, keep it concealed in your hair. It will protect you if Sahasrarjuna molests you. Would you like me to come with you?"

"No, my lord. Have faith in me. I will do nothing to dishonour your name. It is time for you to go now. Please think of me."

Bhargava placed his hand on her head, blessed her and went away. She sat there for a long time, tears flowing unheeded from her eyes.

## THE DEATH OF MRIGA

Mrigarani was transformed. Her face assumed a strange glow. There was a new pride in her eyes. All the time her mind was repeating just one thought; she was a Bhargavi. She was no longer a sinner. She had been cleansed and she was the sister of Bhargava.

She returned to the palace and began to attend to her daily duties. She dressed her hair and hid the dagger carefully inside its coils. She adorned her body with rich dresses and jewels and made herself attractive. She looked at herself and felt proud that she was beautiful.

Sahasrarjuna was drunk when he came to her. He could not take his eyes away from her. She had never before looked as beautiful as she did today. What was new about her? Her silk? Her jewels? The *tilak* which adorned her forehead? The mascara in her lovely eyes? Or the invitation of her body? She made no effort to flaunt her charms or to tease him with her coquetry. Mrigarani today seemed like a queen in her appearance and bearing.

"Welcome," said Mriga and Arjuna sat on the bed. Mriga did not sit by his side as was her custom. She always sat at his feet and leaned against him when she wanted to please him, but today she drew up another seat and sat on it.

"What is your command, my lord?" she asked. Even her voice sounded different.

In his infatuation he forgot what he had come to say. His eyes clouded with passion.

"Come here and sit by my side," he said pointing

to the bed.

"What do you want of me now?"

"Come here."

"No!"

"Why not?" asked Arjuna in amazement.

"You have not married me." Her eyes shone, her face was radiant.

"Marry you? Are you mad? Marriage is not for you. Stop being foolish and come and sit by my side."

"I told you I won't."

"But why?"

"I will not let a strange man touch me."

He laughed loudly.

"I see! When did you ever have a husband that you are feeling squeamish at another man's touch? Come here."

He stood up. She got up too and took a step backward.

"Don't you dare touch me!"

This was strange talk to him. He paused. Her very denial increased his desire.

"What has come over you today? Mriga, are you trying to play a game with me?" he asked.

"No, it is not a game. I am serious."

"So you won't let me touch you? I'll show you." He advanced towards her.

"Marry me first. Then you can have me."

"You are really and truly mad."

"You are wrong. I have become sane today."

"Do not be stupid. What have you to do with marriage?"

"Stay away from me," she snarled at him. "Without marrying me you must not come near me. I am not a harlot."

"What are you then?" asked Arjuna in an amused voice.

"I am a Bhargavi."

"What? What did you say?" asked Arjuna, feigning not to understand.

"I have become a member of the Bhargava clan." Her voice was full of queenly pride.

He took a few steps backward. He was sure that she had lost her head.

"Mriga! Mriga! What has happened to you today? I have a feeling that you are out of your senses. How are you related to the Bhrigus? Tell me."

"You may think I am mad, but it is you who are under a delusion. Today the ancestors of the Bhrigus have accepted me into their fold. I am a Bhrigu."

"You! How did that happen?" His voice was amused and tolerant as though he were humouring a mad woman.

"In the presence of the God of Fire, by the grace of Bhargava."

"Bhargava? You mean Rama Bhargava?" asked Arjuna unbelievably.

"Yes."

"Where is he? Is he alive?"

"Your eyes cannot see him," Mriga answered proudly. Her flashing eyes, the tantalising defiance of her body stoked the fires of his passion. He went towards her to clasp her in his arms. She stepped back and leaned against the wall.

"Arjuna, stay where you are. But if you want to kill me, do so."

Arjuna laughed cunningly. "Kill you? Why should I kill you? I can't live without you, Mriga. Give up this madness and come to me."

"I will give up this madness when you give up the animal in you."

He said nothing. He leaped to where she was standing. His one thought was to take her.

"O Lord Bhargava!" screamed Mrigarani. Arjuna stepped back. In fear of Rama, afraid that he was nearby, he ran towards the bed and picked up his sword. He focused his eyes on Mriga, glowing and beautiful in her emotion. She was staring in one direction with parted lips and heaving breast. He turned in that direction and he saw Bhargava with a halo around his head — his axe on one shoulder, his bow on the other. His eyes were piercing Arjuna with a burning look.

"Bhargava!" cried out Mriga in a reverberating voice and ran towards the apparition. Before Arjuna could catch her, she removed the dagger from her braid and buried in her bosom.

Arjuna stood rooted to where he was, trembling in every limb.

Mriga repeated the name of Rama as she lay dying at his feet.



## THE PREPARATION

Eight riders were galloping on wings of speed to the bank of the river Mahi. There were forty fleet horses among the eight of them and they changed horses every few hours. The riders knew neither hunger nor fatigue, but rode on determinedly.

They came to a hillock and stopped. The leader cast his sharp eyes on all sides. He spied a fire in the distance and taking up his conch he blew on it. In the stillness of the evening the sound was carried far. The leader and his companions dismounted.

Soon from all sides came several other riders. In the forefront was an old man who jumped down from his horse and fell at the feet of the leader.

"Gurudev!" he exclaimed.

"Bhadrashrenya!" said Bhargava and embraced the old man.

"Bhadrashrenya, not a second should be lost. How many men are there with you?"

"About two hundred."

"Where is Vimada?"

"He is with Vishakha in Anarta."

"Tell me, how many Yadavas and Bhrigus are in these forests?"

"Four hundred. A thousand, with their wives and children."

"And in Anarta?"

"Their number is large, my lord!" said Bhadrashrenya. His eyes were questioning.

"And where is Prateep?"

"He has built a habitation in the forest by the Mahi on the road to Avanti."

Bhargava's face was serious. His voice was low.

"Bhadrashrenya, Sahasrarjuna is preparing to send a large army to destroy the Yadavas and Bhrgius. I have sent messengers in all directions to warn our people. Send for Vimada and Vishakha and everyone with them. Arjuna will not spare a single woman or child."

Bhadrashrenya's face was a study. "But that is incredible!" he said.

"Mriga has killed herself," continued Bhargava, "Arjuna has dismissed Talbahu and made Ruru his commander. There are five thousand Tundikeras, three thousand Haihayas and three thousand Sharyatas in Ruru's army. He has also sent word to the king of Anarta to bring an army of two thousand men. Before he arrives, it is imperative that we should take away all the Yadavas and Bhrgius from here. We have got to reach Aryavarta as soon as possible."

"But, my lord!" exclaimed Bhadrashrenya, "we are thousands in number, men, women and children, young and old."

"Every one of them must leave this forest. I have told everyone that they must take this road to reach the city of the Yadavas. But first I have to meet the king of Avanti, your cousin, Vitihotra. Arjuna has ordered him to attack Prateep. Before the message reaches him, I must meet him."

Bhargava now turned to Loma and Kurma.

"You two will have to take care of everything. Bhadrashrenya and I are leaving at once for Avanti."

## SIDDHESHVARI MAHADANTI

Vitihotra, the king of Avanti, was the cousin of Bhadrashrenya. He was a very good man. He had six queens, but all of them were childless. He and his wives prayed to Lord Pasupati to be blessed with a son, but in vain. He was grieved and pained. He had heard that there was a clan of Kapalikas near his city, whose guru a woman, was capable of working miracles. Her name was Mahadanti. He thought he would ask her to help him.

It was said that Mahadanti was hundreds of years old, that she lived on sacred ashes and that she knew the past, the present and the future. The king wanted to go to her and invoke her blessings for a son. But she was always in a trance and it was rumoured that if anyone disturbed her, he would be burnt to ashes, but if she desired to bless anyone, she would herself call him to her presence. Vitihotra had waited so long that he had despaired of receiving her call.

One night he was awakened by someone calling him softly by his name. Ever since his mother's death sixteen years before no one had called him by his name Vitihotra. He rubbed his eyes. 'Vitihotral' called the voice again.

He looked all about him, perplexed. He listened intently. The voice came from far away, from the haunt of the Kapalikas. It was a summons. He armed himself with a sword and taking a companion ran towards the hill.

The voice beckoned him on and on and he reached the top of the hill without stopping.

It was a moonlit night. On all sides the Kapalikas were praying, their heads touching the ground. At the foot of a tree sat Mahadanti devi, a bundle of bones. She was unbelievably old and thin. Only her eyes were open and glowing like fire and she was repeating almost in a whisper, "Vitihotra!" He rushed towards her and fell at her feet and did not raise his head until she awoke from her *samadhi* and spoke to him.

"Vitihotra, he is coming. He is coming!" said the devi.

"Mother, who is coming?"

"He for whom I have been waiting. He is half a *yojan* from here. Go and bring him here to me."

"But who is he?" asked the king in a puzzled voice.

"Do not ask me. Go and do what I told you."

"How can I recognize him?"

"I have seen him. There is fire in his eyes. There is lightning in his hands. There is a thunderbolt in his speech. He is coming. He is bringing you your dead brother. Go quickly and bring him to me."

Vitihotra obeyed her though he could not understand what she meant. Some power seemed to speed his feet along and he took the road to the forest. When he had gone some distance, he heard footfalls on the dried leaves of the forest and he stood where he was. Out of the darkness of the trees emerged two men into the moonlight. Vitihotra turned cold with fear. One of the men had fire in his eyes and lightning in his hand. By his side stood Bhadrashrenya, Vitihotra's brother, who was considered dead. With trembling steps Vitihotra went forward towards them.

"Yadavaraj!" he called out to his brother and stood with folded palms.

Bhadrashrenya took a step backward and Bhargava placed his hand on his axe. "It is I, Vitihotra," said the king of Avanti. The brothers were locked in embrace.

"This is Gurudeva Bhargava," said Bhadrashrenya, introducing Rama.

Vitihotra prostrated before him. "My lord, I have come to receive you. Siddheshvari Mahadanti devi, the guru of the Kapalikas, has come out of her *samadhi*. She has sent me to you. She wants you to go to her."

Bhargava smiled and said, "Mahadanti devi gives up her *samadhi* state only once in three years. How is it she has given it up so soon this time?"

"Because she wanted to meet you, Gurudeva," said Vitihotra.

They climbed the hill and reached the tree under which sat the devi. "Rama! Rama!" she repeated his name. Bhargava fell at her feet and said, "O Mahadanti, I bow to you."

"So you have come!" she said in a tired voice.

"Daddanath guru, who is like a father to me, has told me all about you. I have also recited your *mantras*."

"I know that. I have seen you with Daddanath."

"But how?" Bhargava asked in amazement.

"Rama, I have been waiting for you, waiting for the last two hundred years."

Bhargava smiled humbly. Her voice droned on.

"You, Lord of Creation, master of all passions, I knew that you would come in finite form. That is the reason why I have been waiting for you in this body."

Bhargava's heart was strangely disturbed. He felt as though he was hearing the echo of a song which could never be forgotten. She went on, "I see you at the moment of your birth. I see you in the arms of Amba. I see you

wrestling with Kavi Chayamana. I see you escape from the Dasyus. I see you at the sacrifice in the kingdom of Harishchandra. I see you destroying the Sharyatas."

She was like a woman possessed. She described events as if they were flashing by before her eyes.

"I see you making Sahasrarjuna tremble at the mention of your name. I see you winning over Daddanath, making Mrigarani a Bhargavi."

"Mother!" cried Bhargava in astonishment, "who are you?"

"I am like you — the past, the present and the future. I can hear the world acclaiming your victory. I can see temples raised to you in every continent. You are the Lord of the universe. Save it from fear and uplift it."

Bhargava stood as though transfixed.

"My Lord! Bhargava!" said Mahadanti, "I am tired." Hearing her Bhargava was reminded of Mrigarani's words when she was about to die. It was the same cry.

Their eyes met and the fire in them mingled and became one.

"Please take me," she pleaded. "I have been waiting for your coming."

Her voice was weak and piteous. Everyone was watching with bated breath. "Mahadanti," said Bhargava, bowing his head, "I take you unto me."

She breathed loudly. Fire seemed to rain from her eyes. A storm arose and there were wild cries everywhere. Bhargava looked at her finally.

Bhadrashrenya and Vitihotra stood trembling, as if they felt that the end of the world had come. A brilliant light enveloped the devi. Her aged body vanished. Her face became young like that of a maiden. Her body assumed a youthful shapely form. Her eyes ceased to burn



and took on the tender look of a girl of sixteen.

She fell at the feet of Bhargava. "My lord!" she said softly. Bhargava folded his palms together and saluted her.

They saw her rising in the air. Her bright aura enveloped her and Bhargava stood still watching her astral body. At last she dissolved into the elements and entered Bhargava's body through his eyes, like lightning entering the soil. When the sun rose in the eastern sky, there was no trace of Mahadanti. Only Bhargava stood there, grave and silent.

## JYAMADHA

In a fortnight Prateep's establishment was flooded with Yadavas and Bhrigus who were ready to leave for Aryavarta. Day and night they poured in from all directions. To escape from the fury of Sahasrarjuna they were prepared to pass through unfamiliar forests, climb unscaled mountains and cross strange deserts. They had but one thought, one desire: to reach Aryavarta.

Three days before, a reconnaissance party had left to find the road. This was followed by a small army led by Prateep. Now began the march of a mighty caravan of Bhrigus and Yadavas. There were two thousand carts filled with old people, women, children and domestic animals. Soldiers surrounded the caravan to protect it. In the rear was another small army led by Ujjayant.

Bhargava was in Avanti with Bhadrashrenya and Vimada. Vitihotra had made all arrangements for their journey in comfort. The moment for leave-taking was drawing near. Bhargava was standing in the midst of them all. His axe was gleaming in the light of the sun. By his side his black horse was neighing impatiently. On one side were Vimada, Bhadrashrenya and Jyamadha.

Vitihotra and his six queens bade them a tearful farewell. Bhargava smiled at them all. He placed his hand on the head of the fourth queen and said,

"May you be the mother of a son."

She was so overcome with joy that tears trickled from her eyes.

Bhargava smiled again and said, "Vitihotra, when the son is born name him Mahadanta."

"As you wish," said the king happily.

Ever since the glory of Mahadanti entered the form of Bhargava the people were able to see a halo surrounding him all the time. He was worshipped by everyone as he was considered by them to be a god.

Bhargava signalled to Jyamadha to come near him. He said, "Vitihotra, I am leaving my Jyamadha in your care."

Jyamadha was wonderstruck. "Me?" he asked with amazement.

"Yes, you," said Bhargava. "Jyamadha, I have got to leave you here. In a few days there is going to be a terrible battle between the Yadavas and the Sharyatas. You are the lord of the Sharyatas and Bhadrashirenya is the lord of the Yadavas. If I let you stay with us there will be unrest in the minds of the Yadavas."

"My lord, do you have no confidence or faith in me?"

"I have every confidence in you. But your place is with the Sharyatas in the war which is imminent."

"I am sick of these wars. How long will these killings continue? When will the rivers of blood be dried up? If you do not find a way, who will?"

"Jyamadha, there is only one emotion which is greater than hatred and that is fear. There are only a few great souls who can control hatred all by themselves. There is but one way to stop this massacre: to avert it."

"Why do you not adopt that way?"

"I will. Whoever attempts to spread hatred, on him will descend the wrath of Bhargava."

"So, the Haihayas and the Sharyatas..."

"You are wrong to think that I am their enemy. I make people forget their hatred towards each other. That is my single purpose."

"But, my lord, so long as we are engaged in killing each other this hatred will grow."

"Only if I kill with hatred in my heart. Everyone is dear to me. I want to cure those who hate of their sickness. If there had been place for hatred in my heart there were many opportunities to kill Sahasrarjuna asleep in his palace."

"But Gurudev! Why do you forsake me?"

"I am doing it because I wish you well. You have not understood me yet. Go and lead the Sharyatas. On the day you realize the truth of my words you will know that I am yours."

"When will I be able to understand you, my lord?"

"At this moment your heart is trembling at the thought of the rivers of blood threatening to flow. But, my child, fear is as bad as hatred. When you are able to overcome both you will learn that the man of hate has to be purified by bathing in oceans of blood."

"Still I do not understand," pleaded Jyamadha.

"Remember just this, Jyamadha. I am protector of *dharma*. Whoever goes against *dharma* will be burnt in the fire of anger."

"Vitihotra, take Jyamadha with you. I must go now. May you live for a hundred years. Bhadrashrenya, I will meet you day after tomorrow."

Bhargava turned his horse and rode away. They could see the black locks and the gleaming axe fast disappearing from their view in clouds of dust.

## TOWARDS ARYAVARTA

The journey was on. The long line of men, women and children with their carts and their earthly belongings created the impression of a huge python slowly winding along the path to Aryavarta. They looked more like pilgrims than fugitives. Everyone was enthusiastic. All these years they had lived in fear of Arjuna and the fear was fast disappearing. They were excited at the prospect of freedom from his tyranny. They were infused with a new life.

But Loma was worried by the enormity of the task ahead of her. Vishakha and Kurma helped her to organize the crowd of refugees. Vitihotra had given them plenty of food, which was supplemented by the meat of animals, killed in the forests.

The people were cheerful, unaware of the distance to Aryavarta and the difficulties they would have to face. They spent their time talking about Bhargava and his exploits. He was fast becoming a legendary figure.

On the third day Bhargava came to them. He had with him Ujjayant and about twenty horsemen. He walked with the caravan cheering all of them and talking to them. At nightfall they stopped their carts and after food the leaders, among whom were Loma, Vishakha, Kurma and Ujjayant, discussed future plans with Bhargava.

Bhargava said, "This is not a pilgrimage. Hundreds of *yojanas* have to be traversed before we reach Aryavarta. Tomorrow I will leave to meet Prateep and I will return on the fourth day. In the meantime, every able-bodied

man, woman and boy should learn to do these things: first to obtain victuals; second, to travel as fast as possible; third, to be prepared to fight. Loma, you must take charge and see to it that your commands are carried out."

The conference was over. Bhargava and Loma were alone.

"Come, Loma!" said Bhargava gaily. "Let us go and bathe in the river."

With their fingers interlocked they ran towards the river and bathed for a long time. They came to the bank and still holding hands they stood silent gazing at the river.

"Rama!" said Loma shyly, "I will not be able to fight after some time."

"Why not?" asked Bhargava in surprise.

Loma went into his arms and buried her face in his chest.

"The blessing you gave Vitihotra's queen has visited me, Rama! I am going to have a baby."

Bhargava was so pleased that he lifted her off her feet. He buried his face in her neck and sighed with pleasure.

They laughed softly, together.

Prateep had the hardest of tasks assigned to him. He had to go in advance and cut the way for the march of the fugitives. He had to talk to the forest dwellers and get their help. He had to penetrate forests which had never been tackled before. On top of all this, he had to find food for all of them.

Bhargava met him and stayed with him for a couple of days. He said, "Prateep, I can tell only you about the gravity of the situation. We are surrounded on all sides by enemies. The forests, the dwellers therein, the



rivers, the rainy season which is fast approaching, the Haihayas, the Tundikeras and the Sharyatas — all of these are enemies. A great ordeal is awaiting us."

"When your blessings are with us nothing is an ordeal, my lord," said Prateep.

"It is absolutely essential that we should reach Aryavarta before the rains set in," said Bhargava. "We will have to travel twice as fast."

"That will be very difficult," said Prateep.

## CHAPTER LXXVII

### THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

The army of Sahasrarjuna commanded by Ruru reached the place where Prateep had his camp, but Prateep had fled. Ruru was greatly disappointed since he had planned to destroy the place completely. At the same time it pleased his vanity that Bhadrashrenya and his son Prateep had taken flight.

Ruru was cruel and ambitious. He loved bloodshed. So long as Mrigarani and Bhadrashrenya were in power he had no chance of realizing any of his dreams. But now Sahasrarjuna had preferred him to Taibahu and he had become the right hand of Arjuna.

After the first flush of pleasure Ruru began to realize that his task was not as easy as he had thought. He had lost precious time in his search for Prateep and Bhadrashrenya. He went with his army in search of them and it dawned on him that all the Yadavas and Bhrigus had fled. He marched further and reached the banks of the river Mahi. There he was joined by the army from Avanti and Jyamadha was with them. The combined army now proceeded in pursuit of the fugitives who had left clear tracks behind them. Ruru's army was immense and consisted of infantry, cavalry and chariots.

As it passed through a narrow valley, the troops of Bhadrashrenya and Vimada attacked them from above. This unexpected attack caused havoc in Ruru's men and the army from Avanti fled. Ruru with great difficulty collected his scattered army, but was at once confronted by innumerable horsemen with Bhargava at their head, followed by Ujjayant.

Bhargava riding on his black horse struck terror into the hearts of Ruru's men. Most of the Haihayas had great respect for Bhargava. They had heard of all the incidents connected with Bhargava and Daddanath aghori. They also knew about Siddheshvari Mahadanti. They were convinced that no mortal could touch Bhargava or injure him. They were prepared to fight him.

Bhargava descended like a thunderbolt on the army of Ruru. His eyes were raining fire and his battle-axe destroyed men and horses in hundreds. The Haihayas fled and did not stop until they reached Prateep's former abode.

## CHAPTER LXXVIII

### BHARGAVA ASKS A FAVOUR

The caravan was winding along. It passed through the hospitable forests and now entered the dreadful deserts which yielded no hunt but only brackish water and even that was scanty. Five months had passed since the people had left for Aryavarta with so much joy and enthusiasm. Now there was no spring in their steps and no smile on their faces. They had to fight often. The heat was terrible. Hunger was persistent and thirst was eternal. Sickness haunted all of them. Many sick old men stayed behind to die. Many women and children began to fall like faded flowers in the intense heat and strain of the journey, but were denied their final rites.

Undaunted, Prateep marched on at the head of his army. He fought for food, begged for it, stole it. His only purpose was to feed the many people who had come out with so much hope. Bhadrashrenya who was at the rear, had become old in these few months. His eyes were sunken and his frame had dried up.

Ruru's army was also diminishing but he received some help in men and food. He was determined to pursue the fleeing fugitives. Though Ruru was the official commander the man really in command was Jyamadha. Now that he was far away from the influence of Bhargava his old enmity towards Bhadrashrenya was rekindled. He could never forget that memorable night when he lost all those who were dear to him. He had never forgiven Bhadrashrenya for that. He fought with hatred in his heart.

The march of the fugitives was now a race for life. Bhagavati Loma was heavy with child and unable to ride.

Vishakha was thin and weak. Food was scarce, the men ate once a day, the women once in two days.

Bhargava tried his best to cheer his followers and infuse some enthusiasm into them. He had to complete the journey as quick as possible. Day and night they travelled because their only aim was to cross the desert and reach the banks of the river Saraswati.

In that hopeless march the only thing that kept them alive was the sight of Bhargava. Wherever he went he inspired hope and courage. Soldiers, breathing their last, invoked: "Jaya Gurudev!" Mothers who died without being able to feed their children touched his feet for the last time and died happily. Little children, starved and racked by fever, touched Bhargava and died with smiles lighting their faces.

Bhargava slept and ate little. Even his mighty frame was reduced to a skeleton. His fiery eyes looked even more fiery. His axe was held firmly in his hand. His will was indomitable.

Ruru's army was suffering too. It had become much smaller. And yet Jyamadha was bent on harassing Bhadrashrenya and his men.

The army was camping in an open field. Their composure was broken by the noise of a horse galloping. They saw Bhargava riding towards them. He was all alone. The halo which ever surrounded him shone even brighter.

Bhargava called out to them, "Come! Come here!"

No one had the courage to approach that powerful personage. Some of the men ran away. Jyamadha and Ruru waited, but he did not come near. They knew that he was protecting Bhadrashrenya. It was midday. Evening drew near and still he did not come. At last the army went forward and reached Bhadrashrenya's previous camping place.

Early in the morning the commanders Ruru and Jyamadha heard the neighing of a horse. They came out of their tents and found Bhargava all alone. A hundred men had taken up their bows and arrows but when they saw Bhargava they lowered their arms. Bhargava came near and descended from his horse. He had his axe with him and walked towards them. He smiled and said, "Ruru, are you getting ready to kill me?"

His voice was amused. Jyamadha turned round and saw with horror that Ruru had an arrow poised on his bow. He pulled at his hand and commanded, "No!"

Bhargava held out his arms to Jyamadha.

"Child, Jyamadha, I have not come to fight with you. I have come to meet you."

Jyamadha's eyes filled with tears. He jumped down from his horse, but before he could fall at his feet, Bhargava clasped him in an embrace.

"Gurudev! How is it you are here at this time? Alone?"

"Have I ever needed the company of anyone else?"

Five hundred men surrounded them, Bhargava, Ruru and Jyamadha.

"Where are you camping, my lord?"

"Under that tree."

"How long?"

"For two days."

"But why?"

"To meet you, Jyamadha," said Bhargava.

"I welcome you," said Jyamadha. Ruru did not like this. But what could he do? Jyamadha continued, "Please honour us by being our guest."

"I have not eaten for six days," said Bhargava with a slow smile. They sat and talked for a while after they



had partaken of food. Bhargava and Jyamadha walked away from the others talking all the while.

"Jyamadha, how many more chieftains from Sharyata are with you?"

"Three," said Jyamadha.

"Call them. I have something to say to you all."

They came and Bhargava looked at them and said: "I have come to ask a favour of you."

"What is it?" they asked in surprise.

"Tomorrow or the day after you will be able to destroy the Yadavas."

"We are waiting for that moment."

"I cannot bear to see that. Listen to me. I was responsible for the killing of the Sharyata king. I destroyed the Sharyatas. I gave the Sharyata women in marriage to the Yadavas. I am the cause of your hatred for them." No one spoke. "Jyamadha, I plead with you. Kill me. I taught you how to use the axe. Behead me. That is the favour I came to ask of you."

Jyamadha was stunned. His axe fell to the ground. Bhargava said, "Do not lose heart, Jyamadha. Remember that terrible night. It haunts even your dreams, I know. I was the one who brought Prateep. I instigated Kurma and Ujjayant. I decided that the Sharyatas should all be destroyed. You must kill me first before you think of punishing the Yadavas."

Still they spoke nothing.

Bhargava smiled very softly and said: "You must kill me before you kill the Yadavas."

Jyamadha spoke in an impassioned voice, "Gurudev! Gurudev! I have suffered so much. Have I to endure killing you with my own hands?"

"Why not? If you think that it is right to kill the Yadavas, it is right to kill me. If you are not willing to kill me, how can you kill those who merely followed my orders?"

With his eyes filled with tears Jyamadha fell at his feet and said, "My lord, you might have forgotten, but I have not. I remember how often you have saved my life. I tried to kill you in Pashupati's temple and you forgave me. You saved me from the jaws of the crocodile and from the fearful aghoris. It was you who sent me to join the Sharyatas and ascend their throne. How can I kill you? Let me die instead."

"Jyamadha, why not kill instead the hatred in your heart? Bhadrashrenya is even now ready to be a father to you. Your mother is in his palace now. I have promised to her that neither her husband nor her son will die as long as I am alive. She is wasting away with pain at the thought of the enmity between you and Bhadrashrenya. Your Sharyata army once ten thousand strong and now you are just a thousand. They were once ten thousand strong, but not even five thousand are alive today. Can you not forgive and forget? Is there not a tiny corner for me in your heart? I will glorify both your houses."

They all heard him silently.

"Jyamadha, why do you delay? Come with me. Your relatives are all waiting to receive you with open arms. Or else, kill me. You can avenge the wrongs done to your house and fulfil Arjuna's desire."

Jyamadha looked at his men and said, "Gurudeva means everything to me. To the last moment of my life I will not leave him. Do you wish to come with me?"

"Yes," they agreed reluctantly.

Jyamadha pondered for a moment. Suddenly he cried, "No, no, no, I cannot come."

His voice throbbing with emotion he continued, "My lord, I am no Sharyata. I am not a brave man. I am weak. I am like a little twig floating on the bosom of the floods. You are great, my lord. Let me be burnt in your fire. You commanded me to join Ruru. How can I leave him now? No! No! I will stay behind and die. That is my duty."

Bhargava placed his hand tenderly on Jyamadha's shoulder. "Compose yourself, my child!"

"Please let me stay here," said Jyamadha. "I beseech you. And, my lord, promise that in tomorrow's battle you will kill me. I have neither mother nor father. You are the only one whom I can call mine. Think of me as your son, your disciple, your devotee. It is no matter. I am yours for ever. I have shed tears in your lap and you have stemmed them. Now, I am tired. I have no desire to live any more. In tomorrow's battle I will be the first to advance to you. You must kill me with your axe. It is just this one gesture of love that I ask of you. As a mother puts her child to sleep you must put me to eternal sleep." He wept unrestrainedly.

"Jyamadha, my child, do not weep. You are unhappy and it is my duty to remove your unhappiness. I will grant you your wish. Are you satisfied?"

He took leave of them all and ascended his horse. In the silence of that forest they heard the sound of the horse's hooves receding.

## CHAPTER LXXIX

### ARYAVARTA

The caravan proceeded. Bhargava hurried to join it.

Three days before, on the day of the Akshaya triteeya, which was his birthday, the river Sarasvati had overflowed and flooded its banks. Though the waters had receded, both banks were under several inches of silt and mud. It was impossible for man or beast to cross. The fugitives, hungry and thirsty, waited for the mud to dry up. It was an awful predicament for them. They had hurried desperately to reach the Sarasvati and now they could not cross it. Ruru was fast on their heels and they were trapped.

They had suffered so much. To live in peace and freedom these Yadavas and Bhrigus had run away from their homes taking with them their women, children and cattle. Thirty thousand of them had begun the journey five months ago and out of that immense number twenty five thousand had died. Heat, cold, hunger and sickness had taken their toll. The only power which spurred them on was the fear of Ruru and now here they were immobilised, unable to move forward.

Beyond, away from the silt on the other bank, they could see a hundred men waiting for them under the leadership of Vimada. These men had brought food and water for the hungry fugitives — but alas! those unfortunates could neither advance nor retreat. Aryavarta was just a few yards ahead of them, freedom was within their grasp, but it eluded them. With hopeless agony they waited there, waited for Ruru and his men to come and kill them. They could not even weep. Their despair was complete.

They heard the noise of a horse's hooves from a distance. All eyes were turned in that direction listlessly. On the distant horizon they could see the black horse beloved of them all. They saw the gleam of the axe of Bhargava. Hope, which they had abandoned, glimmered again in their dark hearts. Their eyes were eager, happy. He drew near.

"Why are you all waiting here?" asked Bhargava.

"Two days, my lord, two days have gone by and we have not been able to move." They told him about the terrible situation.

Bhadrashrenya said, "The sun is shining. Perhaps the mud will dry up by the time evening draws near."

Bhargava's face was grave. He said, "This evening or tomorrow morning will be too late. Ruru would have arrived by then."

No one could speak a word. Their despair was complete. The thin thread of hope had snapped and they stood in mute suffering.

Two days passed. On the third day the mire had dried up considerably. It was now over a foot deep. With superhuman effort they dragged the remaining carts across. Not a hand was idle. Everyone worked in a frenzy. Many men and oxen died. By midday they reached the bank of Sarasvati. Thirst had driven them mad. There was but one thought in the minds of all of them: water. They wanted water. It was ages since they had tasted sweet water. They leaped towards the river. No one could stop them.

Ruru and Jyamadha arrived with their relentless army and halted.

They were just as eager for water and they too leaped into the river. Forgetting their enmity in the common

ache for water they all drank together. When their thirsts had been slaked, hatred sprang back to life. A terrible battle was fought right there in the middle of the river. It was such an unexpected onslaught that nothing could be done about it. Bhargava stood on the bank. There was infinite pain in his eyes. He took up his bow and began to shoot at Ruru's army. Three arrows claimed three victims. Ruru looked around to see where the arrows came from. A fourth arrow left Bhargava's bow. Ruru screamed and fell into the river. Bhadrashrenya and the others joined in the warfare. Bhargava blew his conch. From the other bank Vimada blew his conch in reply. In minutes the river turned red with blood; it was thick with the bodies of men from both armies.

A lone swimmer was seen making straight for Bhargava. His eyes were fixed on Bhargava and he said pleadingly, "Gurudev! You could spare an arrow for Ruru. Could you not find one for me? I begged a favour of you and you would not grant it!"

"My child, Jyamadha," said Bhargava with kind eyes, "I want you to live."

"Please spare me the iniquity of being alive, my lord!" said Jyamadha with a loving reproof in his voice. He looked at Bhargava for a long moment, then sank into the river.

Once, twice and then for the third time Jyamadha's head could be seen above the surface of water. Then there was stillness.

Bhargava led those who remained alive and brought them safely to the other bank. He had accomplished what he had sworn to do. He had brought the Yadavas and the Bhrigus to Aryavarta.



## CHAPTER LXXX

### "WHERE IS AMBA?"

Vimada and two Bhṛigu chiefs had come to meet Bhargava. They looked unhappy and had not the courage to meet his eyes. Vimada was restless and on the verge of tears.

Rama looked at them and asked, "What news do you bring?"

Vimada cleared his throat and said, "My lord, most of them have gone to fight in the great war — the war of the ten kings."

"Tell me first, how is the old man?" asked Rama.

Tears fell out of Vimada's eyes. He said, "My father died two months ago — killed in the dreadful battle."

Bhargava lowered his eyes. He paid a silent homage to the great man who was everything to him: guru, comrade, great tutor in arms.

"How are the others?" he asked after a while.

No one spoke. Bhargava's eyes became alert.

"Two of your brothers have been killed in the battle".

"How is my father?"

Vimada looked unhappy. His companions lowered their eyes. Bhargava became impatient. He said, "why, what is the matter, tell me?"

Vimada folded his palms together and said nothing.

"Come, tell me what the matter is. I have got to know."

"My lord, he wanders about the banks of the Sarasvati. He talks to no one. He is now just a bundle of bones."

"Why?" The powerful voice of Rama sounded like thunder. Vimada and his companions, embarrassed and ashamed stared at the ground.

"And mother? How is Amba?" Bhargava asked in a loud voice. Vimada began to cry openly.

"Where is my mother? For God's sake tell me, someone" said Rama.

Amid sobs Vimada managed to speak at last.

"She has abandoned the *ashram*. She has gone to live with the Gandharva king."

There was a fearful transformation in Bhargava. Streams of fire were flowing from his eyes. On his forehead, always placid and calm, his eyebrows were knit into a drawn bow. He stood up and for a moment said nothing. It seemed as though the very earth was trembling. Then he grasped his axe firmly in his hand and turning to Loma, said, "I am going. Take them all to the *ashram*."

Before they could overcome the astonishment, he leaped on his black horse and disappeared from view.

## FATHER AND SON

The huge black horse flew like a hurricane into the *ashram* of Jamadagni. Bhargava was seated on it.

The *ashram* looked lifeless, deserted. There were only a few women and they looked up with unhappy faces. An old rishi was performing *yajna*, slowly and listlessly. It seemed that those who remained in the *ashram* were marking time for the coming of a great disaster.

Bhargava rode towards the hut of his father. Outside a woman was sweeping the ground. She was startled at the sight of the stranger as if she had just seen a bad dream. Bhargava descended from his horse and accosted her.

"Where is my father?"

"There, on the bank of the river." She motioned towards the river wiping her tears. He ran towards the river. At the very boundry of the *ashram* he saw an old man walking towards him. Rama stood rooted to the ground.

He was astounded at the sight of the old man. He was so emaciated, the bones could be counted on his body. The skin on his face was sagging. His eyes were sunken and they looked like tiny lights gleaming from inside a cave. His beard was white and unkempt.

The old man walked with his eyes on the ground. He had a staff in his hand on which he leaned. The great Jamadagni was famed for his magnificent physique and powerful personality, but now he had become a doddering old man. Bhargava shuddered at the sight of the pitiable old man. He threw away his axe, ran towards his father

and fell at his feet. His eyes were raining unaccustomed tears.

"Father! Lord of the Bhrigus!"

The old man stopped. A faint glimmer came into his eyes. In a faint and trembling voice he said, "Please go away. I am not the lord of the Bhrigus."

"Father! Father!" implored Rama with folded palms. "What is this you are saying? Father, I am your son. I am Rama. Have you forgotten me?" Rama began to sob and again and again he said, "I am Rama!"

As though he was making a great effort to focus his attention on the words, the rishi kept staring at Bhargava. Still there was no recognition in his eyes. In a low voice he said, "I am not a father. I have no sons. Who are you? I do not know you."

Rama stood up and folded his palms. "Father, I am Rama, your youngest son. You remember, Sahasrarjuna carried me away? Do you not recognize me still?" He could not control his tears. In between sobs he said "Maharshi! Jamadagni! The son of Maha Atharvan!"

Again the old man made an effort to concentrate. He said in a low voice, "Child, there was a great rishi, Jamadagni, Maha Atharvan's son. But he is dead. He has neither reached the home of his ancestors nor is he able to reach the abode of Yama. He has no right into these worlds. This heir to the glory of the Bhrigus has lost it. He has betrayed his trust. He is gone now. Forget him. Even his memory will sully you. Forget him. There was no such person."

"Father! Oh Father! What are you saying?"

The old man's voice was like that of a man in a dream.

"Forget him, I said. He had fame. He was a master of the Atharvaveda. He had many disciples. He had sons

... But he did not deserve any of these. He could not prevent the destruction of Aryans by Aryans. He could not help Vishvamitra to be victorious. He was not able to guard the heritage of the intellect, courage and purity that was his birthright."

"Father, I do not follow you. I am your son. I will restore all that to you. I will re-establish the fame of the Bhrigus."

"Fool! Fool!" said the old man. "For a long time Jamadagni was under the delusion that he had ardent disciples and sons. He allowed himself to be called a maharshi. He had but one mission: the glory of Aryavarta. This tainted Bhrigu lived in a world of dreams. He was not a wise man. He was blind and foolish. He lost his strength. He could not find a glorious death on the battlefield. He has become the laughing stock of the world. He has no son."

"But you have two sons now: Guru Vidanvanta and I."

"You are wrong. Jamadagni has no son."

"What are you saying, Father?"

"The mother of those sons has disobeyed the commands of her husband. She has gone away with the Gandharva king and has sullied the glory of Aryan womanhood."

Bhargava's head was spinning. Amba, his Amba had gone away with a Gandharva king!

"Father! It cannot be true. Amba, the mother of this entire Aryavarta! The glorious Amba to behave like this! It cannot be true!"

Jamadagni turned his piteous eyes on Bhargava.

"Young man, go away from here. I am not your father and you are not my son. No Aryan son have I

who would kill Renuka and cleanse the name of the Bhrigus with her blood. Jamadagni has no place to go when he dies. His ancestors will not take him in their midst. Go away from here. Go back to where you came from. The house of the Bhrigus is dead."

The old man trembled head to foot and leaning on his staff walked away. Bhargava watched his father's retreating figure. His sparkling eyes were dimmed with tears. He raised his axe and ran towards the *ashram*. There he met his eldest brother Vidanvanta. They embraced each other.

"Brother, where is Amba?" asked Bhargava.

"She is with the Gandharva king," said the brother.

"Why?"

"Sit down, my child and I will tell you about it."

"I do not want to hear anything. She is a woman who is leading a life of sin. Death is the only thing for her," said Rama harshly.

"But...." began Vidanvanta.

Rama shook off his brother's restraining hand and went away from there.



## AMBA

In the far distance, the peak of the Himalayas glittered like gold in the rays of the rising sun. There were many peaks which formed a chain glowing in the light of the sun. At the foot of the nearest mountain there was a tiny hamlet. A little distance from it, under the shade of a tree sat Bhargava, alone. His horse was grazing placidly nearby.

There were about three hundred tribal men in the hamlet, armed with bows and arrows. They did not like the intrusion of this powerful and armed man into their midst. They would have shot him dead, but he told them that he was the son of Amba and they let him in. They were all devotees of Amba.

Amba's hut was nearby. Bhargava was told that it was her habit to visit the hut every afternoon. Early in the morning every day she was wont to go unaccompanied to the home of the king of the Gandharvas.

He saw her coming down the mountain. From far and near the people came saluting her, prostrating before her. She fed them all. By her grace the crops were abundant and the women were fecund. She was worshipped as a goddess. Bhargava was amazed to see all this. He was under the impression that she was in the palace of the Gandharva, in the midst of comfort and luxury. How could it be that this same Amba, this goddess, could be the mistress of another?

His face became serious. He had taken up a great responsibility on his shoulders. He had gone through many rigours to destroy unrighteousness, but this was the

severest test of them all. Death was the only punishment for a fallen Aryan woman, whether it was some other woman or his own mother, his Amba.

She was coming near. For a moment there was a stormy upheaval in his heart. His mother, so full of love, so gentle, so compassionate! She was the best among women and she loved him best because he was her favourite child. All these thoughts came to his mind and his heart was heavy.

He looked at her. During the last few years she had changed. Her hair had become white. Her graceful body looked more tender and graceful. She appeared to be the quintessence of universal motherhood. And he saw something else. In her face, in her body and in her very walk he saw great suffering and unhappiness.

"This is my mother, my Amba!" thought Bhargava. "Can it be possible that she has sinned?" He could not believe it.

She looked at the glowing young man who stood before her. For a moment she could not recognize him. Then her eyes smiled with happiness. Her face was suffused with emotion. She ran towards him with great joy. Holding out her hands she said: "Rama! My son!"

Rama stood up, resolute, unrelenting.

Renuka understood everything. She stopped where she was, overcome with shame. Her face was drained of all blood.

"Father sent me here," said Rama. His voice was devoid of feeling or emotion. She took a step backward. "Like he sent my other sons to kill me? Did he send you on the same mission?"

"He did not ask me to kill you. I have come of my own accord to kill you. You are the wife of the best of

the Bhrigus and you have disobeyed your husband. You are living in sin with another man. You are a burden to mother earth."

"I know that. I have myself passed the same judgement on many women," she answered sadly.

"Why then did you come here?"

"Maharshi Bhrigu is a very great man. He is the epitome of learning and austerity. It is true that I have done wrong. But he has never bothered to learn the reason why. You are my dearest son and even you have not cared to inquire. I have never been afraid of death: not a bit. I died the moment I disobeyed my husband. All round me Yama comes and claims his victims but he has never favoured me with his grace. But today he has come in the form of my son. Come, my child, kill me. Release me from the bondage of my self-imposed sins."

Bhargava was dumbfounded at the misery and agony in her voice.

"Come back to the *ashram*," he said gruffly.

"No," said Renuka in a firm voice. "Bhrigu's sons are happy and are prosperous. I am not worthy of sharing their happiness. If I come back, it will destroy their Aryanhood. Here I am honoured as a deliverer by all. Till death comes to claim me I will have to stay here. I cannot come back to the *ashram*."

"Amba! Amba!" Bhargava called out with feeling. "Your place can't be here." His voice was full of pain and longing.

"Yes, here. That is why I am asking you to kill me. Your father sent his three other sons to kill me but they did not have the courage. You are my darling child. I have committed the greatest sin. I have disobeyed the commands of your father who is greater than the gods.

I want to suffer punishment. Please kill me; my son."

"Mother, if you know you were doing wrong, why did you bring shame on the house of the Bhrigus? Why did you do this, mother? Why?"

"Rama, for thirty years I served your father and his clan. I gave everything I held dear to make my children worthy sons of the great house. And now I have no place in the home of their ancestors. Please kill me. I have brought you up with much love. Will you refuse my last request?"

"Mother, unless I kill you I will not be worthy of the house of Bhrigu. You see it, don't you? I owe it to my father. I have to kill you."

The sorrow of all the years could be heard in her voice when she said, "I have done wrong. But then I want to tell you one thing. I am an old woman. What I did was not because I was full of lust or passion. I was not caught in the whirlpool of the senses. I had to follow another code of another *dharma*. For me to follow that, for me to be true to my *dharma* I had to abandon the *dharma* I had been following so long. Whatever the motive might have been, I have done wrong and I must be punished."

"Death is the only release for you, I know," said Rama. "But, mother, before I kill you, will you answer a question? Will you tell me the truth in the name of your ancestors?"

"What is it, my child?"

"Will you tell me what this *dharma* of yours is, this *dharma* which has made you what you are? Which has made you an exile from the house of the Bhrigus?"

"Wait then. Come with me to the hamlet where the Gandharvas live. I will tell you."

"Where?"

"Do you see that little mountain? Behind it, that is where — where I eloped with the Gandharva king and lived in sin with him."

## CHAPTER LXXXIII

### AMBA'S LAPSE

They walked silently. He followed her. A tiny footpath led them to the hamlet of the Gandharvas. As they entered it, three men greeted her with glad cries. "Amba! Amba!" they shouted and people came from all the hovels and crowded round them. Bhargava looked at them. They were all lepers. It was a terrifying sight. They were in different stages of decay and their only joy was the sight of Amba. She spoke to them softly, comforted them, gave them water to drink, ministered to them.

They reached a large house built of stone and Renuka entered it. In the front rooms there were five or six lepers, whom they passed after talking to them. They went into the inner apartment. Bhargava saw a mat spread on the floor. On it was a man lying. His hands and feet had been eaten away by the dread disease. Pus flowed from them. The sick man saw Renuka and he was mad with delight. Amba! Amba! You have come again today! This afternoon I was sleeping and I dreamed of you and I know you would come again to see me." He joined his stumps in salute.

"Gandharvaraj!" said Renuka. "This is my son who has come to see me. I have brought him so that you can meet him."

The firm and strong heart of Bhargava melted in tears. He threw away his axe and burying his face in his two hands he sobbed, "Amba! My beloved mother, forgive me! Oh mother! Please forgive me!"

She drew him towards her. She held him to her



bosom and said, "Listen to me, my child. I will tell you everything. A year and half ago I was coming back from my father's house. Vidanvanta was with me. We met this Gandharva king and his people. There was a fair in their village and we went there. You remember the spot where I met you today? We were all resting there. The gods were angry with the Gandharvas and this dread disease visited them. I asked my companions to take these people to the city but they refused. Everyone fled from here. I allowed my son to go away but I could not leave these people alone and go. I got the forest-dwellers to help me and I brought them all here."

"Then?"

"There was no one here except me. Everyone ran away. There was no one even to give them a drink of water. They considered me to be a goddess and they depended on me entirely."

She looked at the Gandharva chief kindly and they took leave of him. The mother and son began their journey back. On the way she continued her talk. "Your father was very angry with me. I explained the situation to him but he would not be convinced. He could think of just one thing: that I was living in the house of a Gandharva. The entire Aryavarta was angry with me. Finally the rishi commanded me to come back to the *ashram*. There was no one to take care of these sick people here. Even if I hinted about my leaving them and going away they would implore me to stay on and I was helpless.

"There were eighty in the beginning. Most of them died and there are just about thirty left now. They have made me promise that I will not leave them. That is why I had to disobey the commands of your father. There

your father has everything. But these people have nothing, no one except me. How can I leave them?"

Bhargava was listening with his face downcast. A great shame was on him. His heart was oppressed by it: that he should have thought, even for a moment, that Amba was a sinful woman!

"Your father sent your brothers, one by one, to kill me. I told them what I told you now. What you saw they saw too. They could not kill me. They were very unhappy and they went away from here."

Bhargava looked unhappy. He said, "My poor brothers! They could not cleanse the name of the house of Bhrigus. They could do nothing to uphold the *dharma* of the Aryans. They could achieve nothing. And two of my brothers are now dead, mother. They were killed while fighting."

Renuka wept at the news that her sons were dead.

They reached her little hut. She said, "Now you will be able to understand my predicament and my eagerness for death. I am aching for death. The only way to cleanse the name of the house is with my blood. I am alive because there is no one to kill me. Till today my decision was to enter fire and kill myself as soon as these thirty people die — and that will be very soon. But now you have come. You should kill me."

"Amba, we will see about it tomorrow," said Bhargava.

"In the morning, I will feed the lepers and return. When I come back you should kill me."

They both went into the hut.

## MOTHER AND SON

Renuka got up early in the morning and prayed to the rising sun. She took food and water for the sick people and started walking towards the hamlet. While she was descending, she saw Bhargava sitting near a tiny spring, washing his axe in the water.

"You here?" she asked in surprise.

"I wanted to talk to you before you left for the hamlet."

"Walk with me then. Why do you look so perturbed? Are you going to kill me now?" she asked with a smile.

"Why not?" He asked with a smile of affection and walked with Renuka.

"Mother, you call me a child. You are wrong. I am not a child any more. I have become the guru of all the Haihayas. I am also the guru of the aghories. I can fly in the air and walk on water. Do you know that?"

"Really!"

"I am not joking, mother. The people in Mahishmati consider me to be a god!"

"That I have known ever since you were an infant. I used to call you my little god."

"I am married, mother. I have a wife. I forgot to tell you yesterday."

"Wife?" she asked in surprise.

"I have married Loma."

"I am not surprised. Even when you were small she was crazy about you," she said laughingly.

"I have two fathers. One is Jamadagni on the bank of the Sarasvati and the other is Daddanath Aghori on the bank of the Reva — he has adopted me as his son."

"Mother" he said suddenly, "you told me that you have no place in the world of the Aryans. That is not true."

"Of course it is true. No one will accept me there."

Bhargava smiled gently and said, "Amba, no one can enter the abode of the aghoris, where I am the son of their guru. Fierce crocodiles block the way from the river and wild animals block the land. The disciples of Daddanath Aghori know not what hatred, anger and other human evils are. Amba, I will seat you on the back of a crocodile and take you there. Will you come with me, mother?"

"Do not talk like this, my child. These are mad words."

"No mother, it is not mad talk. Father has truly gone mad because he has lost faith. He considers his sons as traitors. Many Bhrigus have been killed. Because of you the glory and the fame of our house have vanished. You cannot go back to Aryavarta. Abandon the Bhrigus. That is the only way for you now."

"You are wrong. Your father is not able to protect the sanctity of the name of our house. Your two brothers are dead. It is up to you to do it for him. You are the son of Maharshi Jamadagni, the greatest of the Aryans. You are a god. You are born for just that: the resurrection of the Bhrigus and of Aryavarta."

"So you will not come with me?"

"No. Your place is in Aryavarta. Save Aryavarta and give up all thoughts of me. There is nothing that can save me."

"Mother, here is my horse. I can carry you. You are lighter than a flower. Loma will serve you like she would a goddess. Come with me, mother!"

"I will never be a millstone round your neck. If you so wish you can kill me. I will be happy. If you have not the courage for that, I will enter fire and kill myself. But that will mean that you have not cleansed the taint on the name of your house."

"Mother, you are forgetting a vital truth," said Bhargava in a serious tone. "I have come to establish *dharma* on this earth and not to destroy it. If I kill you I will be destroying *dharma*."

"You are raving," said Amba with a smile.

"Amba, father has forgotten what *dharma* is. It seems to me even my ancestors have forgotten it. And when you talk about this duty of mine, that I should kill you, you are also forgetting *dharma*. This life with another man only you can live. You are a part of my father and his purity. Where there is purity *adharma* can never enter. Come with me. I will talk to my father and explain everything to him. I will rekindle the dead flame of our glory. Come with me, Amba."

"No, I will not come. No one will heed your words. You will have to bear the ignominy which is burning me now. You have still not understood your people."

Bhargava's attitude altered. He was no longer her softly smiling son. He was the Master, like unto the peak of Gowrishankar: distant, changeless, eternal with a strength irresistible and measureless. The very tone of his voice changed.

"I shall declare the law. The world will have to listen. I will leave it no other choice." His eyes began to burn.

Renuka was frightened by this new Bhargava. She stood silent.

"Come with me," said Bhargava. It was more a

command than a request.

"No," said Renuka in an equally firm voice. "Have you considered the fate of my poor Gandharvas?"

"I have already taken care of that. Not one of them is alive now. Early this morning I killed them all."

Renuka screamed. She looked angrily at her son, the murderer of thirty, standing there coolly.

"You cruel beast! You have killed my poor helpless friends!"

"They could never have lived long," said Bhargava serenely. "Death was a merciful release for them."

Renuka buried her face in her hands and sobbed as though her heart would break.

"Amba! Goddess of mercy!" said Bhargava in a tender voice. "Your tears are for strengthening the strong, not for lengthening the torture of the dying."

Renuka shrieked. Ignoring her he lifted her bodily, placed her on his horse and descended to the valley. She wept wildly and hit him in the chest with her fists. Bhargava held her firmly in his arms and said, "Weep weep, mother! You have to cry. Weep if it will help you. You have suffered so much."



## MAHARSHI VASISHTHA

They rode far. Bhargava met a group of people who were travelling towards the banks of the Shatadru and from there, southwards. He joined the group and came to learn from them the details of the Battle of the Ten Kings as it was called. On one side were Maharshi Vasishtha and the king Sudasa and they were fighting the sage Vishvamitra, Purukutsu and nine other kings. The king Bheda was the chief opponent.

One day Bhargava left the group of men and went to the banks of the river. There Renuka found him. His face was still. He seemed engrossed in thought. She sat by his side and said, "What is worrying you? What has happened?"

"Amba, if I tell you what is worrying me your sorrow will be too great."

"My sorrow? Is it possible for it to grow any greater than it is? I have reached the very limit of suffering. Nothing will hurt me any more."

"Amba, have you faith in me?"

"You are my everything. You are the only one left for me."

"Will you promise me that you will not weep?"

Both were silent for a while. Then Bhargava spoke.

"I will tell you, Amba, the entire Aryavarta has been torn to shreds. Maharshi Vishvamitra has been killed and rishi Vidanvanta is dead."

His voice was low and his words came slowly, tersely from set lips.

"What? What are you saying, my child?" asked

Renuka in a frenzy of pain. Her eldest son had been killed. She wanted to weep her heart out but the pain in Rama's face made her tears choke her throat. There was great ache in her heart and she could not speak.

"Yes, mother. You had four sons and I am the only one left alive. My father has lost the power of thinking. He is always in a daze. Amba, why don't you weep? Tears will comfort you. Please weep to your heart's content. Kavi Chayamana, my Vridha is gone. The house of the Bhrigus is threatened with extinction. The glory of the Bharata house is gone. Maharshi Vishvamitra has been killed. Devadatta the Bharata king is dead." Amba was sobbing.

"The great Vasishtha, the home of all learning and austerity, he has done all this with his own hands. His heir rishi Shakti is dead. The great king Purukutsu has been killed and the brave king Bheda is no more. We are now going towards the place which is the grave of all that was beautiful and glorious in Aryavarta."

"What are you going to do, my son? What will you do now?"

Bhargava smiled gently and said, "I am going to recreate Aryavarta."

"How will that be possible, my son?" asked Renuka in a hopeless voice.

Bhargava laughed softly and said, "Amba, already you are losing confidence in me! You are losing courage. First let me clear up this confusion. Come, let us go and look for the bodies of my uncle Vishvamitra and my brothers and cremate them. Then we will talk about other things. You must have faith in me, Amba!"

She was looking at his glowing face in silence.

"My son, I promise you. I will never lose faith in

you." She took him in her arms and she was thrilled to see the power flowing from his eyes.

He coaxed the men who had been his companions till now to go with him to the battlefield. The sight was more gruesome than they thought. Eagles and jackals hovered over the entire field which was strewn with the dead forms of many heroes of Aryavarta. Hardening his heart Bhargava entered the battlefield and they all began to search for the bodies of the dear departed ones. It was dark. They carried torches and searched all over the field. They found a man who had been buried under the weight of a chariot. He was still alive and they brought him out. Bhargava found that he was Parasara the grandson of Vasishtha. He was taken to the camp and Amba nursed him.

The search went on. Maharshi Shakti, the son of Vasishtha, Purukutsu, and many others were lying there wounded. Vidanvanta was found and Bhargava gave his body to his weeping mother.

The fort of the king Bheda had been burning all the while. Bhargava tried his level best throughout the night, up to daybreak, but he was not able to find his uncle Vishvamitra.

Bhargava went to the *ashram* of Vasishtha. The great rishi was seated before the fire. He was glowing with Brahmatejas. His frame was thin and his beard was white and flowing. His face revealed great inward peace. In a melodious voice he was reciting the *mantras*.

It was a long time since Bhargava had seen the maharshi. He had once dreamed, when in the jungles of Girnar, of a pure and chaste Aryavarta. He saw today the personification of that dream and the reality

was even more beautiful than his dream. Here was a man who was Aryavarta, the glory, the beauty, the wonderful peace of it, the Aryavarta which Bhargava had wanted to establish. Rama had thought Vasishtha to be different. He had come to the *ashram* of Vasishtha to chide him for the carnage he had caused. He had come to teach him a lesson in humility. But the maharshi was not what he had imagined. Bhargava had thought him to be ambitious, that he was the fire which had deliberately lit the entire Aryavarta. He had imagined him to be a royal guru drunk with power. Vasishtha was not like anything Rama had imagined. He was, at the moment, the image of learning, of *tapas* and the purity that come of them. He was like a steady flame which burns without smoke.

Bhargava placed his axe and his bow at the foot of a tree and went to the spot where Vasishtha was seated. He fell at his feet and saluted him.

"Who is it?" asked the maharshi in a sweet and affectionate voice.

"Can you not recognize me, my lord? I am Rama the Bhargava."

"My child, how did you happen to be here?"

Rama was clasped in the arms of the old man.

"I have come to ask a favour of you," said the young man.

"A favour? But certainly!"

"You must come with me and help my kinsmen to reach the Manes. I have been searching all night on the field of battle and I have found most of them." He told him about the terrible night, about his quest and the bodies he had found. He told the old man about Parasara and that he was alive.

"What about Maharshi Vishvamitra?"

"We could not find him," said Rama.

"Even if you had not come, I was about to go to the field and do just what you want me to do. I only wish I can find Vishvamitra. I want to meet him once if he is alive. If he is not, at least I would like to perform the final rites for that great soul."

They left for the battlefield. The many pyres had been prepared and Vasishtha invoked the gods to accept his offerings. He performed the rites for them all. The pyres were lighted. The great heroes who had been fighting on opposite sides the previous day were now joined together in death. The smoke from all the pyres merged and rose up in the sky as a single column.

## CHAPTER LXXXVI

### RIKSHA

Riksha, the boyhood friend of Vishvamitra was the royal priest of the Dasyu king Bheda. He hated war and he had to watch the war which was being fought near the fort. He had always had a kind heart. He could never bear to see anyone suffer.

From the top of the fort he could see his friend Vishvamitra fighting. He saw his proud bearing as he shot arrow after arrow at his enemies. His opponent was Shakti. Riksha saw his friend's body being pierced by many arrows. He could see the suffering in the eyes of his friend. Riksha disliked fighting and violence. He would faint even at the sound of arrows if they were shot within his hearing. But today he felt that he must reach the battlefield, he must help his friend. He managed to reach the chariot where he had seen Vishvamitra fall. A rare courage took hold of him. He carried the body of Vishvamitra on his shoulders, but as he ran from the battle-field several arrows pierced his back and he was greatly hurt.

Riksha was a big man and very strong, but he was weakened by the blood flowing from his wounds. He was set on rescuing his dear friend, who was wounded and should not fall into the hands of his enemies. Not caring for his own wounds Riksha went on — falling, rising, with the heavy Vishvamitra on his back. Staggering under the weight Riksha tried to hurry towards the *ashram*.

Riksha's mind went back to the days of his boyhood. In the *ashram* of Jnani Agastya he used to go about



with the boy Vishvaratha seated on his shoulders — sweet, handsome, charming, Vishvaratha was small and his hair was bright and golden. To him, Riksha was *Reech*, the bear. It was amazing that this same boy should have grown so heavy and strong — so heavy that he could not carry him! In the old days, Agastya's daughter Rohini would be playing with her puppies and Vishvaratha would be standing watching her with his finger on his lips: and now blood was flowing from those very lips! Vishvaratha was his special friend. He had always belonged to *Reech*. His constant worry was about the safety of that little boy. Even today as he carried the Guru Vishvamitra that was the only worry in his heart.

A red curtain seemed to be hanging in front of Riksha's eyes. He saw there all of them: Rohini, Ugra, the daughter of Shambara, Agastya and Lopamudra. The faces came and went. They seemed to swim towards him and away from him. But none was there in flesh to help Vishvaratha. He was on the shoulders of Riksha who loved him best.

Riksha stumbled and fell down into a small pit with his precious burden. He laughed a little. In the *ashram* of Agastya they had fallen down just like that once. He fainted. After a while he regained consciousness. He opened his eyes and he saw Vishvamitra on the ground. There was a lot of blood all over the place. Blood was flowing from the bodies of both of them.

Vishvamitra opened his eyes and said, "Come, let us go to your *ashram*." They tried to rise up together and together they fell down. They had to reach the *ashram*. How could Riksha allow his dear friend to be captured by the enemies? Somehow they stood up. Vishvamitra's eyes were closed. He could not move. Riksha could not

move either. But he had to take Vishvamitra to the *ashram*. He had to attend to him there. He tried hard to lift him up but he could not do so. He had to drop him. Suddenly he saw that his friend was vomiting blood. How could he reach the *ashram*? He raised him up. Vishvaratha was his best friend, his greatest friend. He had always carried him on his back and today he could not do it. This should not be.

He managed to lift him up and took a few tottering steps. Again he tripped and they were again falling down....*ashram*....Agastya's *ashram*. Why does Vishvaratha refuse to sit on his shoulders? Is he angry with him? "Vishvaratha!" His throat was making terrible noises. He could not lift his dear friend. Riksha's head began to spin. Darkness enveloped him.

## VISHVAMITRA WINS IN DEATH

Bhargava and a soldier from the Dasyu army reached the *ashram* of Riksha. There was nothing but desolation. They heard the heart-rending sobbing of a woman. They entered and found the dead body of a very stout man. By his side was a woman crying. She was the wife of Riksha, the dead man.

The setting sun cast its fading light on the face of the dead man and on another who was lying at a distance. Bhargava was able to recognize the face of the other man easily. That handsome face, those large eyes, that noble forehead, that dignity, that look of love which he cast all round, the brilliance in those eyes, these could belong to one man, Vishvamitra. Bhargava ran towards him and falling at his feet cried. "Uncle! Uncle!" Holding his pain at bay Vishvamitra turned his eyes towards him and said, "Who are you, my child?"

"I am Rama, the son of Jamadagni. I have returned from Anupadesa."

Biting his lips to control his pain Vishvamitra sat up.

"My child, you have come back? May you live a hundred years! It is good that you have come. The Lord Savitar has sent you to me. Listen to me very carefully. I have not much time. I will live for just a few hours more. When Orion wheels into the sky I will have to go. Listen to me, my child. Do not grieve for me. I have not been defeated. I have won. I can assure you, Rama, that I have won. Now let me say all that I want to say. I was hoping that someone would come to me and listen to my last words.

"This is my beloved friend Riksha. We have been friends ever since we were children. He has a wife and children. He was the royal priest of the dead king Bheda. You must protect his dear ones.

"Rama, come near and listen carefully. Shashiyasi, the cause of the war, has been captured by king Sudasa. He will try to purify her and make her the wife of Krishashva. But let me tell you, she was a true wife of the dead king. I performed their marriage and I have known their love. You must have heard of Vasishtha and Arundhati, of Atri and Anasuya. These two were just such a couple and so they must remain. They have taken little Shibi, the heir to the throne of the Dasyus. If it is possible for you, you must take care of him and bring him up as a prince worthy of the throne of Shambara."

Vishvamitra had to pause. He spat blood and his breathing was hard.

"I will obey all your commands. You can be sure of it," said Bhargava humbly.

"My line is ended. Devadatta is gone, yet I am not worried about that. I have won. This is the day of my triumph. Self-restraint and strength are great but greater than these is surrendering oneself for the sake of one's mission in life. The gods have been good enough to grant me this chance. I have not been vanquished. Aryavarta seems to have become a ruin. But on this land I have established the banner of unity. My death will set a golden seal on it. All the tribes are now united by blood and by the bonds of *dharma*. There will no longer be any difference of colour or clan.

"Sunahshepha will continue to propagate my teachings to the world. He is a great admirer of you, Rama. Please see that the throne of the Bharatas is not vacant.

I have a daughter named Shakuntala. She was born to Menaka. The sage Kanva brought her up and she is married to the king Dushyanta. His son is Bharata. He must be placed on the throne. I have shed my blood for this one principle: that there should be unity in Aryavarta. When Bharata grows big give him my message that he should make this earth more glorious than the heavens."

Vishvamitra turned his eyes on Riksha and said, "We used to sleep always together in those days and we are going to sleep together now. He did not want me to fall into the hands of Vasishtha and so he came to the battlefield and carried me away. He was mortally wounded by arrows. Not minding them and his wounds, this dear man carried me to his *ashram*, falling often; not being able to carry me any more he fainted away. I could not help him one bit. He dragged himself and me to the *ashram*. He died because of me."

They were silent for a while. Vishvamitra was getting weaker. Bhargava said, "Uncle, the maharshi Vasishtha wanted to see you. May I bring him?"

"The Great Vasishtha? Indeed I am fortunate. Please let me have the honour of meeting him."

His voice was virbrant with the thrill of victory. His eyes were gleaming with pride. He coughed a bit and turning his eyes on the setting sun he repeated the Gayatri:

"Aum Bhoorbhuvassuvaha: Aum tatsaviturvarenyam bhargo devasya dheemahi Dhiyoyonah prachodayat."\*

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\* We contemplate that adorable glory of the Deity — that is in the earth, the sky, the heaven! May He stimulate our mental power!

(R. III 62. 10, also S. and Y.)

Bhargava went out and returned with Vasishtha.

"Forgive me, said Vishvamitra, "I cannot get up to honour you. I can do it only with words."

"Maharshi Vishvamitra, my blessings are always on you." The sage came near the dying man and stroked his head with affection.

"With the rise of the constellation Orion I will be leaving this human body. I am happy that I was able to meet you before that. It is my good fortune."

"My child, I am an old man and yet I am not ashamed to ask you to forgive me. I have been an obstacle in your path all these years," said Vasishtha.

"My lord, you have never been an obstacle. All that I am is because of you. If there had been no Vasishtha I would have been just Vishvaratha, the king. It was because I vied with you that I was able to attain all this learning and all this penance. It was because of you that I gave up a throne. I became a high priest to lead the people in the path of *dharma*. You were a master of the *mantras* and so I became a master of the sacrificial lore. But you taught that the Aryans and the Dasyus were different. To extract the poison from your teachings I accepted the challenge of this great war. You are to me the mountain which is ever kissing the skies. I am but a meagre climber who grew strong in climbing the peaks of your exploits."

"Best of rishis" said Vasishtha, "The gods have given us both the power to see but they have chosen to show us different paths. Who knows what secret is hidden in this divergence of views? If I had not resisted you, where would I have been and where would have been Aryavarta? But I am very unhappy about one thing. I am so much older than you. I should have



reached the Manes instead of you."

Vishvamitra smiled wanly and said, "I am not unhappy. I have achieved what I set out to achieve. The gods have granted me my desires without my even asking." Vishvamitra coughed again. He turned his brilliant eyes on Vasishtha and spoke, "The Lord Savitar has granted me all my desires. By his grace I have been able to bury the differences between the Aryans and the Dasyus. I made Ugra the daughter of Shambara into an Aryan. I made it possible for every human being to attain Aryanhood. Sunahshepa, the son of Ugra will be the heir to my learning. He will propagate it in the world. Wherever the sacred Gayatri is chanted there the soul of Vishvamitra will always be present."

His eyes were getting dimmer. The evening was waning. The sky was now losing her brightness. He paused for a while and spoke again.

"The gods have made me the instrument to establish the divinity in man. I shed my tears for man and in the midst of those tears I was able to have a vision of truth. I realized that all men are alike: that Aryanhood does not depend on colour or birth but in the man himself. If man is able to reach God he is an Aryan. My lord, I want to tell you something. Perhaps you were under the impression that I sided with king Bheda because I wanted to encourage his sinfulness. It is not so. I did it only for the sake of my principle: that there should be nothing to divide human beings into Aryans and Anaryans. The real difference is in their way of life. Any one can live the life of an Aryan if he follows the ideals. One who achieves learning and penance is an Aryan. In this very life he can be reborn and become an Aryan and this applies to any man. If he takes no advantage of this

chance to become good, he is an Anaryan."

Vishvamitra's eyes were getting larger with an innate brightness. He smiled and in the firelight his handsome face glowed with a strange new glory. He spoke again in a whisper.

"I can see the expanse of tens of thousands of *yojanas*. I can see beyond the bourne of Time... this world, like a sacrificial altar, is helping man to make himself a god."

He grew incoherent. "Come!" he said suddenly gasping for breath. "Come, let me wipe your tears... I hold you close in my arms... that is why I am going... I take you to the resplendent path leading to Godhood... beyond the reach of hatred, malice or desire... no one need weep over his weakness."

A moment passed. Suddenly Vishvamitra cried out, "The Lord Varuna has opened the portals of heaven."

"Come... higher... still higher!"

His voice was very faint now. "Jamadagni, my brother, Orion has risen in the sky."

Vishvamitra's inert head fell on his chest.

Tears flowed from the eyes of Vasishtha, best among the rishis.

## THE DREAD LAW OF THE BHRIGUS

The whole of Aryavarta was stunned at the news. Bhargava was taking his mother to the *ashram* of Jama-dagni. He had told his father that he would obey his command and his father wanted the death of Renuka. To obey his father Bhargava was going to kill his mother. He had taken a dreadful oath that he would kill himself after he had killed his mother. It seemed as though Aryavarta has been struck by a great calamity.

Bhargava was now considered to be a god. Everyone talked of nothing but his prowess, his greatness, his divinity and his glory. When he was born the mountains were open. Even when he was a child it could be seen that he was of divine origin. The Dasyus could not kill him and the boatman who had found him could not sell him as they were wont to. He had made the Lord Varuna appear before Sunahshepa. He had frightened Sahasrarjuna into submission all for the sake of Loma. In Saurashtra from the hill of Girnar he had made a new river flow for them. He had reinstated the Nagas and had destroyed the power of the Sharyatas. At Mahishmati he had made the mistress of Sahasrarjuna turn against him. She had become his disciple and he had made her a Bhrigu. The guru of the aghoris had become his great companion. He had learned to fly in the air and walk on water. The great Siddheshvari Mahadanti had entered into him. He had rescued the Yadavas and the Bhrigus from the wrath of Sahasrarjuna and brought them to Aryavarta. He had killed the Gandharvas and brought his mother in his arms. In the dead of the night he had entered the battlefield and had

cremated the heroes who were killed. Vishvamitra had placed his mantle on the young shoulders of Bhrigu and he was to carry out all the commands of the great man. People were familiar now with every moment of his eventful life. He was worshipped by all. Such a man had sworn to die. He was to kill his beloved mother and then sacrifice himself on the altar of *dharma*. A great tragedy was imminent and they could not avert it.

The great *tapasvi*, the great rishi Jamadagni was his father and Renuka his mother — Renuka, the very personification of love, compassion, selflessness. Alone she had ministered to sick lepers and for that sin she had to die, and that, at the hands of Bhargava. That was the dread law of the Bhrigus. It was a terrible predicament for Bhargava. On the one side he had to obey his father. That was the Aryan rule. Again, to kill a mother was the very limit of *adharma*. People were all dreading and at the same time waiting for the terrible moment.

Vasishtha was greatly worried. He was saying, "Jamadagni will never recall his command. If the son kills an innocent woman like Renuka it will be the very limit of *adharma*. If Bhargava does it and then kills himself as he has sworn to do, the future of Aryavarta is gone indeed. The time has come when the glory of Aryavarta will be extinguished for ever. The only thing left for us is to pray to the gods to avert this calamity."

Prayers were said in all the *ashrams*. All the great maharshis had joined together and they were sending up prayers day and night. As the dreaded day was drawing nearer and nearer, everyone was seen travelling to the *ashram* of Jamadagni. They wanted to be present for the denouement of the tragic drama that was to be enacted.

Jamadagni was still in a dazed condition. All the ideals which he had tried to establish had now collapsed. His wife, the ideal of Aryan womanhood was not his any more. His sons were all gone. Not one of them had made any attempt to obey *dharma*. His learning was destined to be wasted. There was no one to carry on the tradition of the Bhrigus. Aryavarta was a wasteland. He was waiting for the coming of death. And yet he dreaded the death which would not take him to the home of his ancestors. He had been damned for ever and it was more than he could bear. It was now eight months since Rama had come to him. He was also like the other sons — a coward, unable to do right.

Several things were happening. Strangers were seen in the vicinity of the *ashram*. They carried arms. The forest around was being cleared and new huts and *ashrams* were being constructed. On the other banks of the Sarasvati too, could be seen huts being erected. Jamadagni saw all these activities but he was not interested. They seemed to him like scenes in a dream. He would see them and forget all about them the next moment.

Vimada and the others had come to the *ashram* and told everyone about the dread oath of Bhargava: that he would kill his mother in the presence of his father and kill himself the next moment. Jamadagni heard that his son would kill Renuka and that comforted him. His heart was aching for the coming of Rama. There was still a chance for him to be with his ancestors. The rest of Rama's oath never was heard by him.

All those who were left alive after the great war had arrived in the *ashram* of Jamadagni. They were all waiting for the coming of Bhargava and dreading it.

Maharshi Vasishtha came to see Jamadagni.

"Maharshi Jamadagni, lord of the Bhrigus, may you live a hundred years," said Vasishtha. Jamadagni's eyes were listless and they did not seem to recognize Vasishtha.

"I am Vasishtha. Can you not recognize me, maharshi?"

Jamadagni fell at his feet trembling.

"Welcome. I am sorry for my lapse. But I am not a maharshi."

"In a few hours Renuka will be coming," said Vasishtha. Jamadagni's lips were trembling and he turned his back on Vasishtha and walked away. His head bent and a great pain seemed to be racking him. Vasishtha gave up all hopes of coaxing him to withdraw his command to Rama.

Tears were filling the eyes of everyone. They were all assembled on the porch of the *ashram*. Their beloved Bhargava would be arriving any moment. They loved and worshipped him. Yet they could not find it in their hearts to welcome his coming. He was their very life and they did not want him to come. They did not want to see him die as soon as he came. Yet, tense with despair they all waited for his coming.



## THE DENOUEMENT

The distant sound of a horse's hooves could be heard. It was coming nearer every moment. It was terrible to wait and hear its approach; more dreadful than the steps of approaching death. Those gathered in Jamadagni's *ashram* knew that Bhargava would never break his word and neither would his father give up his one desire: to see Renuka dead.

They saw a distant cloud of dust. Against it they saw the dark horse of Bhargava and seated on it, like a streak of lightning on the breast of a raincloud was Bhargava. He was galloping towards them like a hurricane. They saw Amba in his arms. "Amba! Amba!" the name resounded everywhere. Vimada went near Bhargava. He held the horse's reins while Bhargava jumped from it. Bhargava held his mother in his two arms. He ran towards his father. Everyone followed him.

Bhargava went near his father and placed Amba at his feet. Amba clasped the old man's feet with her hands. Jamadagni stood up. His eyes were wild and glowing. They moved from Amba to Bhargava and back to Amba.

"Father, I have brought Amba," said Bhargava in a dignified voice.

"Rama, you have come?" His eyes lost their glow and he closed them.

"Father, I have brought Amba, my mother. I am Rama."

All the people were watching with bated breath.

Jamadagni began to understand. He looked at the kneeling figure at his feet and said nothing. Rama was

standing there, towering above all of them like a lone peak. His eyes were raining fire. His face was forbidding like the sky when a thundercloud is collecting on it. Again he said, "Father I have brought Amba. I have carried out your commands."

"Rama, you are really and truly my son." The old man's voice was full of pain. He looked pathetically eager as he said, "Will you obey my command?"

"Yes, father."

"Behead this woman who is not an Aryan any more." The world began to tremble.

"Yes, father."

Rama raised his axe. "Amba, my dear mother, mother of the world, I have to do what my father commands me to do." Rama's voice was gentle, full of love.

"My child, look! I am prepared. You are to be my deliverer. Do you know how happy I am at the thought?"

"Rama," said Jamadagni, "this has never happened in Aryavarta before. The wife of a maharshi has never abandoned him for another man. And I had the misfortune to see it happen in my home, in the house of the Bhrigus. What you are about to do will help to preserve the *dharma* of Aryas. Behead her."

Bhargava's face was crimson with anger. In a trembling voice he said, "I will do what a son ought to do. But this is the last time I will do it."

Jamadagni was startled at his words. He looked at him. Bhargava spoke on.

"I will certainly kill Amba, my mother. I will obey your command since you are my father. But then, after that I will not be your son any more. I refuse to join you in the home of your ancestors. If I disobey my father my Aryanhood will perish. If I kill my mother

too, my Aryanhood will perish. An Aryan must not disobey his father, neither can he kill the mother who gave him birth. Even if, by chance there is a way to save my Aryanhood, I do not want it. I do not desire to live after I kill my mother."

"Are you trying to tell me that you really want to die?" asked Jamadagni.

"You are a great rishi. You must know what I am saying. In your eyes I may be an Aryan if I obey your command. But in my eyes I will be the greatest of sinners. I was, till now, proud of my heritage. But now that pride has been broken. If you had so desired, you could have united the entire Aryavarta into one. If you had so desired, you could have made peace possible between the two maharshis. If you had so desired, you could have made Amba, the shining light of the world, your companion and helpmeet. Forgetting your own *dharma*, if you had paid attention to the greater *dharma* you could have saved the world. But you did not desire it.

"Caught in the web of personal pride, the pride of an Aryan, you forgot the vital things. You were conscious of only one word, 'Aryan', and you never bothered to look for the truth behind it. You have been fashioning your life on a pattern set by others and you have not been able to make anyone happy."

Vasishtha was listening to this impassioned speech of Bhargava. He was fascinated by Rama and his vibrant words.

Amba stood up and caught hold of Rama and said, "Rama, what are you saying?"

"I am speaking the truth," said Rama and turned once again to Jamadagni. "Lord of the Bhrigus, never once has anyone dared to speak the truth before you.

Amba, not one of these knows the truth and I am saying it: I will certainly behead you since it is my father's wish. But after that I do not belong to you. I will never again be born in the Bhrigu clan."

— Bhargava's voice was resounding. There was heard the low rumbling of a thundercloud in the sky. It sounded like the echo of the powerful voice of Bhargava. He turned again to his father.

"You have dared to call this purest of women a sinner. You sent your four sons to kill her. But did you go yourself to see why she had to disobey you, to see which Gandharva she was serving?"

"Rama, will you desist?" said Amba in a stern voice.

"No, I will not stop. I have eyes and you, my father, are blind. Or else you would not have called my mother a sinner: a woman who was nursing lepers, lepers who were helpless and were dying. *Adharma*, sin, does not lie in the word, in the behaviour or in the act but in the motive which is behind it. Amba was a mother to all those dying men. She was not just the wife of a man filled with false pride and false dignity."

Renuka was weeping without restraint. She tried again to stop Rama.

"Why should I stop, mother?" He turned his burning eyes to his father and said, "Blinded by the false pride of an Aryan you have struck at the very roots of *Aryatva*. And you want to continue the good work you have begun!"

Jamadagni's lips were trembling. Renuka's sweet eyes were now red with anger. She slapped Rama hard in the face. "Rama, you are making me ashamed of the fact that I bore you. Is that your aim?"

Rama's fiery eyes were holding them all under their

spell but her eyes were challenging him. He became quiet in a moment.

"My child, you are insulting the pride of your father. Fall at his feet and seek his forgiveness."

Rama stood firm, proud and unrelenting. His anger was still there glowing.

"Rama, throw away this pride of yours. You must," said Amba. Her voice was proud too, proud that he would listen to her.

"Child, this is my final command to you. After that you can behead me."

Bhargava fell at the feet of his father. But there was no humility in it.

Renuka understood his feelings. Gently she stroked his back and said, "No, my child, not that way. You are the upholder of *dharma*. The son's head should be at the feet of his sire in humility. Do you not know it, my child?"

Bhargava's anger vanished. He placed his head on the feet of his father. His voice was choked with tears when he said, "Forgive me, father."

Jamadagni was now coming out of his daze. Tears were falling from his eyes.

He bent down and raised Bhargava. He held him in an embrace.

"My child, may you live a hundred autumns!" he said.

"Father, let me perform what you commanded me to do."

Bhargava turned towards Renuka. Jamadagni spoke in a feeble voice.

"Rama, what you say is right. Aryavarta cannot be protected by the pride of an Aryan. One should act like

an Aryan. You are right."

As though he had been woken up from a sleep Jamadagni asked, "My son, what is this you are going to do?"

"I am trying to obey you. I am about to behead my mother," said Bhargava.

In a voice choked with emotion, the old sage said, "Renuka! To me you were dead though alive, but now your son has given you new life. He has restored you to me. Rama, throw away the axe. I take back my command."

So saying, Jamadagni lifted up Renuka with his own hands.



## CHAPTER XC

### ARYAVARTA LIVES AGAIN

Bhargava had once promised to his mother that he would build a new Aryavarta out of the ruins of the war. He kept his promise. He first rescued Shashiyasi, the queen of Bheda from Sudasa. He established the young Shibi on the throne of Shambara. Bharata, the son of Dushyanta, was now gracing the throne of Bharatas. All the commands of the maharshi Vishvamitra had been carried out. Sunahshepa was the home of all Vishvamitra's teachings and he was propagating them all the world over. The *ashrams* of Jamadagni and Vishvamitra had been combined.

Vasishtha had realized that it was no more possible for him to prevent the mingling of the races. With his mature wisdom he saw the futility of the conflict between the Aryans and the Dasyus. A mixed race had sprung up in the intervening years. The times had changed. He realized that the long drawn out struggle between the races and the war had managed to blend the two races. This fight between Vishvamitra and himself was a necessary process of adjustment between the races. Vishvamitra was right when he said that he had won. He had triumphed in death.

Vasishtha no longer represented the spirit of the age. He had reached a stage when he could serve the gods by retiring. He wanted Rama Bhargava to be the royal priest of all the four monarchs but Bhargava refused. He was in the world for a mission; to destroy *adharma* and he was intent only on that.

The world was again a beautiful place to live in.

Rama had made an ally of the great monarch Mandhata. The kings were all united. Aryavarta was once again flourishing. Bhargava and his battle axe protected the world. Learning, austerity and the watchword of the Aryans, *rita*, were flourishing. The *ashram* of Vasishtha became a home of learning, a *vidyapeetha*. There were thousands of pupils imbibing this vast learning. *Mantras* and rules of *yajna* were taught and research was carried on. The only aim was purification of the self, and the peaceful atmosphere of the *ashram* of Vasishtha helped them all to realize it.

Bhargava was far-seeing enough to realize that men should be good fighters too. He did not want the pupils to be mere pilgrims on the path of theology. While they had to learn to be true Aryans they had also to learn that their dear Aryavarta was too precious and had to be protected from enemies. The people were taught the arts of fighting. Fine breeds of horses were brought from all over the world for this purpose. The army was trained by Bhargava and his assistants, Bhadrashrenya, Prateep and Kurma.

Vasishtha was performing a sacrifice to which came people from all parts of Aryavarta. He was fair looking and his hair and beard were white. By his side was seated Bhargava with his black beard, black matted locks and black flashing eyes. Bhargava saluted Vasishtha and said humbly, "My lord, you are the living image of Aryanhood. We seek inspiration from you. Please lay your commands on the four monarchs who are here. The entire Aryavarta will be in their care and it is their *dharma* to guard her."

Sudasa, Mandhata, Shibi and Bharata fell at his feet all together. Vasishtha smiled at Bhargava and looking

at the kings, said, "O kings! Protect righteousness. Propagate *dharma*. Be true Aryans. That is all the command I can give and that is all you need."

Vasishtha smiled again at Bhargava. It had the gentleness and charm of moonlight glistening on the peaks of Kailasa. He said, "Bhargava, what blessing shall I give you?"

"I want just one thing," said Bhargava, "that Aryavarta should extend from the Sindhu to the Simhal."

"So be it," said the great maharshi.

It was late in the night. Vasishtha came to the tent of Bhargava. It was a moonlit night and they sat talking for a long time. Vasishtha said, "Bhargava, what are you doing? Parasara told me that you are preparing for war."

"If I had not done so, do you think the monarch Mandhata would have agreed to be one of the four protectors of Aryavarta? Did you not watch him today? He was taken aback for a moment before agreeing to the pact."

"That is right. You are wise, Rama. Now I understand why you were so keen on Mandhata being invited to the sacrifice."

"My lord!" Bhargava was laughing lightly. "You are purity personified, while I am the personification of fear."

"How can there be purity where there is fear?"

"One who strives for Aryatva can achieve it. But, my lord, ordinary men are not made that way. They cannot strive for it all by themselves. They can conquer hate and desire only by fear."

"But that will only help to make men cowards."

"Forgive me, but I have seen hate and desire which those in Aryavarta can never imagine to be possible. Guru

Daddanath was always saying that the most cruel animal is the human being. Unless there is an unknown and all pervading fear in the mind of man, this demon in human form called man will never accept *dharma* and there will never be a chance for people like you to live."

"Bhargava, do you think this pact will stand? Will these kings be able to keep their word and protect *dharma*?"

"So long as they keep the wheel of *dharma* revolving, they will not go astray from their path. They will be able to keep up their promise."

"Bhargava, I want to ask you once again. Why do you refuse to be the royal priest? You can be the priest for all four of them. You can lead them in the right path and you can protect Aryavarta."

"No, my lord. I will always be aloof from kings and priests. Learning, *tapas* and self-restraint, these three define Aryanhood. It has reached the very peak of perfection in you and I will never insult your position by taking it up."

"What is your mission in life then?"

"Till the last breath remains in my body my mission is to protect *dharma*, to protect the Aryavta in every individual. That is my mission."

Vasishtha could say nothing. After a moment he said, "Bhargava, I will never live to see the day when your mission will be fulfilled. You think of things which my imagination has never reached."

Bhargava smiled and said, "You are right, my lord. It is true I am different from others."

## MATSYAGANDHI

Sahasrarjuna was advancing with his immense army like a hurricane to destroy Aryavarta and to make it his. Desolation followed in his wake. He left behind a trail of burning villages, dying men, raped women. He destroyed everything he touched. There was devastation and nothing but devastation.

He arrived at the *ashram* of Parasara. The sage was on the banks of the Yamuna. His eyes were wet with tears. He had tried to warn the kings about Arjuna. Parasara had seen a great war and he dreaded the destruction which threatened Aryavarta. But his plea fell on deaf ears. The kings preferred death to submission. His fear had come true. Kingdom after kingdom was destroyed by this demon in human form. The country of Asindivat had become a huge burning ground. The sage could see the smoke rising to the skies. He could hear the piteous cries of the people.

He saw a rider approach him, enveloped in a cloud of dust. He had some hundred men with him. Arjuna was terrible to look at. His face was powerful and fearsome. His roars drowned the music of the river. His eyes were drunk with power and the pride of conquest. Parasara had seen him many years before in the *ashram* of his grandfather. Seeing this personification of cruelty Parasara trembled.

The old sage went forward and caught hold of the reins of Arjuna's horse. Arjuna stared in surprise and resentment at the man who had dared to grasp the reins of his horse. His companions raised their swords.

"What are you trying to do, old man?" he asked.

"You are the lord of the Hehayas. I beg of you, please go back from here. You do not seem to realize what you are doing. When you sow the seed of cruelty you will reap only a harvest of poison. Out of every drop of blood you have shed will rise a killer. Haihayaraj! You are the lord of the world. Why do you persist in this work of destruction? Hatred will never help anyone nor will it help you. It will kill you, burn you to ashes. It is a dread fire which should not lodge in the heart of man. It will destroy you. Pause for a while, ponder for a while. Please go back to your country."

Sahasrarjuna was listening to his words with a smile of contempt. He was sure it was a mad man talking. Laughing cruelly he hit the old man. All the men around him laughed in glee. Blood flowed from the mouth of the sage and he fell unconscious to the ground. Without casting even a look at the fallen man they rode away. All through the night they were bent on plundering and fighting. Parasara lay unconscious on the banks of the Yamuna.

A fisherman's boat reached the bank and the fishermen stepped out with their catch of fish. They were regular visitors and everyone knew them.

Out of the boat descended a young girl. She was about thirteen years of age. She was wearing a scarf wrapped about her bosom. On her hands and feet were ornaments made of silver. She looked beautiful in the moonlight. She was dark and in the light of the moon she looked as though she had been moulded out of copper. On her lovely cheeks could be seen a glow of happiness and joy. Her young breasts were like twin flower buds and they made her even more attractive.



As she was coming she saw at a distance a figure lying on the sandy shore. She ran towards him. Parasara was still unconscious. Blood trickled from the corners of his mouth. The young girl was scared. She bent down to have a closer look and recognized the rishi.

She had often seen him when she came there with her parents. They would bring milk for the lame rishi in the hut. He would never talk to anyone, but bless them with his hands. The girl had always been fond of him. His face was gentle and full of love. His eyes were always kind. Her tender heart wept at the sight of that kind man in such a state.

The rishi is dead, she thought.

She called out to him but he did not reply. She was sure that he was dead. She placed her head on his chest and began to weep loudly. Hearing her cry her mother shouted, "What has happened to my Matsyagandhi? What is the matter?"

"Mother, the rishi is dead," sobbed the girl. The mother came near. She raised her daughter and placed her hands on the rishi's eyes. He opened them for a moment and closed them again.

"He is alive! Surely, he is alive!" said the woman. By then all the men had gathered around. They asked the women to go back to the boat.

"Go back to the boat. The land is being burnt up by a dreadful man. This place is fit only for demons now. Come, let us go."

The girl said to one of them, "Father, this rishi is dying."

He saw Parasara only then. He shouted, "What! Our rishi!" He went near and looked at the injured. "That demon must have killed him," he said. Another fisher-

man said, "Take him with you. You can nurse him back to life." They lifted Parasara into the boat and placed him at one end. The mother of the girl washed his face with water. The boat hurried away.

It was midnight. All the fishermen were sleeping. Only the moon was shining and the Yamuna was making music as she flowed placidly. Parasara was still in a daze. He was half awake and half asleep. The moon had softened the lines of pain and suffering on that old tired face. For a long while the girl kept staring at the face of the rishi. Then she came nearer. Taking the head of the rishi in her lap she crooned a folk song in a soft low voice.

Hurt by Sahasrarjuna and wounded by the hatred in the world of men Parasara found a strange comfort and peace in the song which the young girl was singing.

## SAHASRARJUNA AND VASISHTHA

When news came to the *ashram* of Jamadagni about the advance of Arjuna, Vimada and Bhadrashrenya were present. They knew Arjuna only too well. At once all the inhabitants of the *ashram* were made to leave to safe places. Only Jamadagni refused to go.

Bhadrashrenya tried his best to coax him but in vain. "He is consuming all and everything. He is no respecter of rishis and the wives of rishis. He is a demon and not a man," said the old veteran.

Jamadagni said, "I know that he is powerful. But the power of men like him is limited. He will never be able to disturb my penance. You must all go away from here. If he sees men with arms it will only aggravate the animal in him. If I am alone here he will not raise even his little finger against me."

"You are wrong, my lord," said the old uncle of Arjuna. "You have no idea how cruel he can be."

"I am not impressed. After all I am an old man. Another year or more, and I will have to die. What if I am killed earlier? It matters nothing to me. I will never run away in fear of a disciple of the Bhrigu house, a man who belongs to the clan which has been cursed by my father, Maha Atharvan."

Renuka insisted that she would remain behind with the maharshi.

They had to agree to the wishes of the old couple. Bhadrashrenya collected a huge army. He had also sent word to Bhargava who was away in the north, on the banks of the Sindhu with Mandhata.

The *ashram* of Vasishtha had now become a *vidya-peetha*. To him and his disciples came the news of Arjuna's invasion. They got the message of Bhadrashrenya that they should all leave the *ashram* and go away to places which were safe from the advance of Arjuna. At first, they laughed it out, but when news came of the horrors perpetrated by Arjuna, of the destruction of Traiarjuna, of the burning of the *ashrams* of the rishi Medhatithi, of the razing of Asindivant, of Arjuna's marching towards the river Sarasvati, they had to leave the *ashram*. Vasishtha himself summoned them all to his presence and told them that they had to go.

"The forest fire has begun to burn up Aryavarta. Only Bhargava can stop it; no one else. It may not be possible for Rama to come in time. I plead to you to go away from here for the time being. Hide yourselves and guard the wealth of learning which you have accumulated."

"What about you, my lord?" they asked.

"I will not leave this *ashram*. My dear children, do not worry about me. I have gone through many things. Since the time of the kings Divodasa and Gaadhi I have watched the greatness, the glory, the learning and the prosperity of Aryavarta. I have seen her at the very peak of her glory. I have striven day and night for it. Today this same Aryavarta will be burnt to ashes by this wicked man. I am not needed in this world any more. I will try to melt his heart and save my beloved Aryavarta. If I am not able to do so, I will die in the attempt. I will leave for you a heritage of glory and fame which will not be forgotten by posterity."

On the tenth day, Sahasrarjuna's army crossed the Sarasvati and camped in the neighbourhood of Vasishtha's *ashram*. The lord of the Hehayas was intoxicated

with his many victories. The peaceful atmosphere of the *ashram* was now disturbed by the battle cries of his men. Sahasrarjuna looked all around and saw nothing but emptiness. Not even a cow was found grazing in the neighbourhood. He looked hard and espied a lone spiral of smoke snaking its way to the sky.

Arjuna entered the *ashram*. He had an old grievance against the maharshi. Vasishtha had once dared to advise him how he should behave. Arjuna had never forgiven him for that and he wanted to pay off the old score. He found the courtyard was occupied: Vasishtha and five others were pouring oblations into the fire. Even Sahasrarjuna was taken aback for a moment. It seemed to him that those old rishis were reprimanding him silently for his deeds. But it was only for a moment. He composed himself and walked towards them.

In a loud and arrogant voice he called out, "Vasishtha muni!"

Vasishtha was engrossed in worship. He did not bother to pay heed, nor did the others raise their heads.

Sahasrarjuna stood silent for a moment. Again he shouted, "Vasishtha muni!"

The rishi raised his head and looked at him. He mentioned him to be silent.

"You have become such a great man now," said Arjuna. "Do you not recognize me?"

Vasishtha was still pouring oblations into the fire. He said, "I have known you since you were a child, Arjuna."

"I asked you if you recognize me in my present role. I am the death of your Aryavarta. Do you recognize me?"

Vasishtha said nothing. Sahasrarjuna spoke on, "Once upon a time you dared to teach me the rules of

conduct, the ways of an Aryan. I have come today to teach you my way."

"There is but one way of living: the way God wills us to follow," said Vasishtha.

Sahasrarjuna laughed inordinately and said, "The gods have willed that you should obey me. Do you know that I have come to burn up the whole of Aryavarta?"

"Arjuna, you have ever been shallow. Looting, killing and arson are possible for everyone. There is nothing remarkable about it."

"Everything is going to be burnt. Then you will realize my power."

"God is great. What I have planted in this world will never be destroyed by you. The more you burn, the more it will live. New sprouts will spring from the burnt tree."

"Stop bragging. Get up and make arrangements for feeding my men."

"That is not possible. The *ashram* of Vasishtha will never play host to a crowd of sinners, murderers and destroyers." Vasishtha's voice was harsh.

Sahasrarjuna was wild with anger. He raised his sword and advanced towards the maharshi. He rushed towards him to grab his beard. But the great Vasishtha said, "The gods will guard my purity."

Before he could suffer the indignity of Arjuna's unclean touch the great Vasishtha fell down dead. Sahasrarjuna shrank back. The sight unnerved him. Ever since Mrigarani fell at his feet and died Sahasrarjuna could kill thousands but he could never bear to see anyone dead. He could not bear to see the dead form of the great maharshi. Covering his eyes with his hands he went away.

He issued orders for the *ashram* to be burnt down.



## THE ASHRAM OF JAMADAGNI

The army of Sahasrarjuna was marching towards the *ashram* of Jamadagni. It looked like the sea which had forgotten to stay within the bounds imposed on it by nature. The sound of the horses' hoofs sounded like a distant rumbling and the rumbling became a roar as the army drew nearer. In a short while the *ashram* of Jamadagni was surrounded by Arjuna's men.

The *ashram* stood for all that Arjuna hated. He wanted to avenge many wrongs. His Mriga was lost to him because of Bhargava. His commander Ruru and many of his powerful warriors had all died because of Bhargava. The only thought in the heart of Arjuna was revenge. He had come with this huge army to fight Bhargava and he found no one there to oppose him.

No one seemed to expect him and he was greatly disappointed.

The soldiers were afraid to enter the *ashram*. They knew that Bhargava was a friend of Daddanath Aghori and they were scared lest he should jump on them. There was no one in the *ashram* of the Bhrigus. There was no trace of Rama Bhargava.

Arjuna ordered that the army should camp there. Then he entered the *ashram*. In the courtyard he saw the guru Jamadagni and by his side Renuka. He recognized this couple who were glowing with the mellowness of age. For a moment he wondered if they would also slip from his grasp like the maharshi Vasishtha. At once there came before his mind's eye the pale face of the dead rishi. He brushed the memory aside and advanced into

the yard. He laughed arrogantly and said,

"Best of the Bhrigus! Jamadagni! I am Sahasrarjuna, the son of Kritaveerya. I salute you."

The voice of Jamadagni rose in a feeble tremble. Yet it was firm and harsh. "If, by any chance, you are the son of Kritaveerya who was cursed by my father, then you have polluted this *ashram* by entering it. Maha Atharvan's curse is still on your tribe. It has not been lifted."

"That is exactly why I have come to you," said Arjuna. His laughter filled the entire *ashram*. "Your father cursed my grandfather. So I have come to you to make you lift the curse."

"Your journey is useless. Do you not know that the curse of the Bhrigus is like a thousand-headed serpent which will sting you for ever? The curse will not be lifted."

"I am the death of everyone in Aryavarta. Tell me, where are your many disciples? your cows? and your dear and beloved son?"

"My son will be here when the time of your death draws near."

Arjuna's voice was suddenly grave. He said, "Let us not talk about all that. You must have heard of my many conquest ever since I set foot on Aryavarta. I have conquered half of it. It is just a question of time before I conquer the rest of it. I want to tell you one thing. Some one of the Bhrigu clan has been our guru for many generations. Become my priest. I will then leave you and your disciples unharmed. I will give you more cows and wealth — anything you desire.

"You are rich in conceit and arrogance. Why do you need a guru at all?" asked Jamadagni in a scathing voice.

"This is why. If you become my guru peace will

descend on my country and my glory will be intensified."

"And you hope that I will accept your offer? That I will agree to be your guru?"

"There is no question of hoping. It is a question of compulsion. You have got to lift the curse on my house."

"I can lift the curse with the help of my *tapas*, but my *tapas* is not for the benefit of sinners like you." Jama-dagni's voice sounded unruffled and firm.

Sahasrarjuna was agitated and somewhat frightened at the power of the rishi. His cruelty came bubbling up now.

"Will you not grant my request? Are you not my guru?"

"There is not even a gleam of hope."

"You will not obey my command?"

"Obey your command? You fool! Listen to me. Till today no man has dared to command me. Barring my father and my guru no one has the right to command me. I will not obey anyone.

"Are you aware of what will happen to you? I will kill you."

"Is that all? Even lions and snakes can kill a man. It is not a great thing."

"I will set fire to your *ashram*. I will massacre your disciples. I will take away all your cows."

"It is but right that you should do all this. Or else how can the name fit you? The name you have earned, demon in human form?"

Sahasrarjuna was wild with anger. "Are you also trying to escape from my hands like Vasishtha did?"

"I am not aware how the great Vasishtha escaped from you. As for me, I was never in your grasp for me to think of escaping. It is you who are still struggling

under the curse of my father."

Arjuna instructed his men to tie Jamadagni to a tree. He shouted at the old man, "Tell me now. Will you lift the curse and become my guru?"

"Are you trying to frighten me?" said Jamadagni calmly. "Fool! The blessings of a Bhṛigu will never be yours!"

His face was calm and serene. Sahasrarjuna took an arrow from his quiver and shot it at the rishi. It buried itself in his shoulder.

Arjuna went away from there after leaving one of his men to guard Jamadagni.

Jamadagni was tied to the tree all night. Renuka sat by his side. Arjuna came back the next day. He stood before the rishi and asked him the same question. Not getting any answer he shot another arrow at his other shoulder. Jamadagni closed his eyes for a moment and that was the reaction Arjuna got from him.

Every night Arjuna would go out on his nightly round of looting and fighting and every day he would come back to the *ashram* and pierce the rishi with his arrows. The body of Jamadagni was punctured with the many arrows and yet according to the instructions of Arjuna his henchmen saw to it that the old man did not die.

It was midnight. Taljungh, the lieutenant of Arjuna came to the presence of Jamadagni and said, "My lord, the emperor will not rest until he kills you."

Jamadagni opened his tired eyes and said, "I know that."

"If you permit me I can release you from this torture."

"How?"

"I cannot, of course, release you from these bonds. Neither will you be able to run any distance from here.

If you permit me I can kill you with just one arrow and end your torture. I cannot bear to see you suffer."

"My child, Jamadagni will never shrink from pain and torture. I am watching how far his animal nature will lead Sahasrarjuna." He closed his eyes. He had become very weak and his head could not stand erect on his shoulders any more. After a while he called out, "Renuka."

"Renuka, if Rama comes give him this message."

"What?" asked Renuka.

"Tell him that this Aryatva which I am experiencing every moment is much more powerful than animal power and even the power of death. It can never be conquered. It can never die. It will always be victorious."

## CHAPTER XCIV

### ON THE BANKS OF THE SINDHU

Bhargava was camping on the banks of the river Sindhu. With him were Harita the son of Mandhata, the eighteen year old Bharata, the son of Dushyanta, Shibi, Yadu, Turvasu, Duhyu and Anu. They had all brought their warriors with them.

Bhadrashrenya and his army of Bhrigus had arrived. It was an immense army. When they first heard of the coming of Sahasrarjuna the Aryans were terrified. But Rama took up the leadership of the Aryan tribes and in order to conserve and convoke the strength of his army he withdrew with them to the north. He would not waste effort in resisting the first shock of the invasion. Arjuna and his army had crossed the Sarasvati. Bhargava knew that the time had come when he should face Arjuna with his immense army of Aryans.

Bhargava was standing on a hillock. By his side stood Loma and the other great heroes. There was the noise of preparations everywhere. Bhargava stood alone in his cold anger. His eyebrows were knit above his fierce eyes. His silence was even more terrible than his words. All around him was a halo of brilliance which dazzled the naked eye. Even those who knew him well, who had been with him day and night, could not bear to look at him now.

Ever since he refused the status of the royal priest Bhargava became the object of reverence of all the four monarchs. Vasishta was very fond of him. The maharshi Sunahshepa considered him to be an incarnation of the Lord. Bhargava's strength grew with the reverence with



which people talked of him. He was as unapproachable as a lone peak soaring into the very heavens. Like a perennial river which has its source in a mountain, strength and power flowered from him. An aura of mystery surrounded him and it was impenetrable. His gentle smile, the brilliance of his eyes, the terrible frown on his face were all different aspects of this man who was so unapproachable and at the same time belonged to everyone.

In a voice which echoed in the forest caves Bhargava gave his final instructions to his men to march.

## CHAPTER XCV

### BHARGAVA IS COMING !

"Bhargava is coming!" was the cry of hope in the hearts of the people when they heard about the great army marching to oppose Sahasrarjuna.

"Bhargava is coming!" was how the rishis greeted each other in the caves of the great Himalayas.

"Bhargava is coming!" That was the news which reached Arjuna when he was busy looting the kingdom of Sudasa. Each one of his men was telling him, "Bhargava is coming!"

"Bhargava is coming!" shouted Sahasrarjuna, "Prepare the army to meet him." First the news came from the banks of the Sindhu and then it was relayed from the caves in the mountains. From all sides the only cry heard was, "Bhargava is coming!"

"Bhargava is coming!" said Talajungh to Renuka.

She spoke to the great Jamadagni, "My lord! Rama is coming!"

"I knew it," said he in a faint voice.

But no one knew from where he was coming or how many men he was bringing with him. They knew just this, "Bhargava is coming!"

Whether he was waking or sleeping the one sentence echoing in the heart of Arjuna was, "Bhargava is coming!"

He went to Jamadagni and after hurling four more arrows into the old sage's body, he said, "Your son is coming. I can now tie up father and son to the same tree."

Jamadagni said nothing, but his eyes lit up. He thanked the Devas and became unconscious.

## THE END OF SAHASRARJUNA

A fierce battle was raging between the armies of Sahasrarjuna and Bharata. The young man had been expertly trained by Bhargava in the art of fighting and the men of Hehaya found in him an able foe. It was midday and the sun's rays beat down relentlessly on the battlefield.

All of a sudden a streak of lightning seemed to be advancing towards the field. All the Bharata soldiers shouted with joy, "Gurudeva has come! Bhargava has come!"

As though someone had pulled his face forcibly in that direction Sahasrarjuna turned his face towards the approaching figure. A black charger was galloping towards them. It was breathing fire. Seated on the horse Arjuna could see the face and figure of his hated foe Bhargava. The same glowing face, the same black locks and beard, the same axe, though it seemed bigger now, the same glittering eyes. A huge army was behind him. In a short while the two armies met. A terrible battle ensued. The heroes on either side fought bravely. Sahasrarjuna was a fighter of no mean order and he displayed great prowess. But it was of no avail. His army was scattered and it had to beat a hasty retreat.

The remnants of Arjuna's army was retreating towards the *ashram* of Jamadagni. Bhargava and Bharata followed it. Finally Sahasrarjuna and Rama met in combat. Bhargava raised his axe and Arjuna, his mace. The two great weapons clashed. Sparks flew. The mace was broken and Arjuna threw it away. Bhargava's axe had been diverted

by the mace of Arjuna and it killed the horse of the Hehaya king. Arjuna leaped down from the falling horse and stood roaring. Drawing his sword he jumped on Bhargava.

Fifty axes were at once raised to kill him. Bhargava signalled to them to withdraw. Sahasrarjuna and Bhargava fought a duel. Bhargava stood where he was and with his axe he deflected the blows of Arjuna. The sword flew out of Arjuna's hand. Bhargava stood calm and unruffled. Only his eyes threw out a challenge to Arjuna.

Arjuna's eyes were glowing with hatred. His face was twisted with rage and hate and was terrible to see. With clinched fists he rushed towards Bhargava and tried to jump at his throat. Suddenly he took a step backward. He stood paralysed for a moment. His eyes saw the other Bhargava the terrible Bhargava, the Bhargava he had seen at the time of Mriga's death. This Bhargava was immense, his head touching the skies, his axe shining like the midday sun, his eyes like streams of fire.

With a soft smile Bhargava threw away his axe and took a step towards Arjuna. They clasped each other in a deadly embrace. They fought, but all the strength and all the skill of Arjuna were of no avail. Bhargava flung him to the ground, sat on his chest and hit him hard on the face with his fists. Arjuna roared with pain and tried desperately to escape from Bhargava's grip, but he could do nothing. Beaten to a pulp, Arjuna fainted.

"Vimada, tie him up," said Bhargava at last and stood up. It was then that he saw his father.

Jamadagni was watching the fight with wide eyes. His body was tied fast to the tree. There were many wounds on his body and blood and pus were oozing from all of them. The four arrows were still lodged in his body. He

had reached the final stages of exhaustion. His head was bent and the veins in his neck were swollen with incessant pain. But his eyes were still large and brilliant. By his side stood Amba.

Bhargava saw the state to which his revered father had been reduced by Arjuna. A cry of agony escaped his lips. He ran towards Jamadagni crying, "Father! Father!"

Sahasrarjuna who had recovered was pretending to be still unconscious. Vimada was trying to tie him up. With a sudden twist of his body Arjuna pushed Vimada and Prateep away from him. In his hand he took two arrows. He was an adept in the art of shooting two arrows at the same time in different directions. He aimed them at Maharshi Jamadagni and Bhargava. Loma and the others who were standing by screamed. Amba who was standing near the tree let out a loud and piteous wail. She covered her eyes with her hands. One of the arrows had lodged in the heart of the great rishi Jamadagni.

Bhargava turned around and saw the other arrow hissing towards him. A cry escaped him, like the howl of a jackal.

No one knew what was happening. Everyone stood astounded. All of a sudden Bhargava rose up in the sky. The arrow which was aimed at him fell harmlessly on the ground. Everyone had heard about Bhargava's power to fly in the air but no one had seen it till today.

Still in the air, Bhargava laughed a terrible laugh. Everyone's heart stopped beating. From above Bhargava measured his distance and descended to the ground. He landed right on the spot where Vimada was trying to tie up Arjuna. The moment he touched the ground he sprang so quickly that no one could follow his movements. He fell on Arjuna, and slapped him hard. Arjuna's eyes

were opened wide with terror. With the speed of lightning Bhargava's nails were buried in Arjuna's throat. Streams of blood gushed forth. Severed from his body, the head of Arjuna was thrown far away.

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### BHARATIYA KALA KENDRA

The Kala Kendra is devoted to the development of Drama, Dance and Music. The Kala Kendra produces dramas and dance ballets in English as well as in Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi to encourage amateur talents. An Inter-Collegiate Dramatic competition, in several languages, is also sponsored by it every year for the same purpose. Ideal facilities for these activities are provided in the Bhavan's auditorium—the Kanji Khetsey Sabhagriha.

### BHARATIYA SANGIT SHIKSHAPITH

An Academy of Indian Classical Music, affiliated to the Bhatkhande Sangit Vidya-pith, Lucknow, which is recognised by the Central Government for courses leading to the Bachelor of Music Degree.

### BHARATIYA NARTAN SHIKSHAPITH

An Academy of Dance for teaching the four systems of Indian dancing, viz., Manipuri, Kathak, Kathakali and Bharata Natyam.

### BOOK UNIVERSITY

Publishes books, ancient and modern, at low price (Rs. 2.50 each) to make available the best literature and classics of India and the world to the common man in an easily understandable form. So far 115 titles have been published and over 10,00,000 copies have in all been sold. Some of the books have also been published in Hindi, Marathi, Bengali and Tamil. A new one-rupee Series has also been started.

## **PRAKASHAN MANDIR**

Apart from our **HISTORY** and **BOOK UNIVERSITY SERIES**, this department also publishes the results of the research and other activities of the various Mandirs of the Bhavan and books of cultural value. Its publications include:

**Bharatiya Vidya Series:** Critical editions of texts, translations and original works of research in Indology—in Sanskrit and English. Published volumes 22.

**Singhi Jain Series:** Critical editions of ancient works and manuscripts connected with Jain religion and literature. Published volumes 52.

**The Glory that was Gurjaradesa:** A comprehensive study of Gujarat in 7 volumes. Published volumes 2.

**Munshi Sahitya:** Social novels, historical plays, biographical works of Munshiji and Smt. Lilavati Munshi in Gujarati and English, the copyright whereof has been kindly gifted by them to the Bhavan. Published volumes 80.

## **JOURNALS**

**Bharatiya Vidya:** An Indological research quarterly in English started in 1943. Published volumes 22.

**Bhavan's Journal:** An English Fortnightly devoted to life, literature and culture started in August 1954. Present circulation 50,000 copies. Annual Subscription Rs. 6.50.

**Bharati:** A Hindi Fortnightly started in August 1956. Annual Subscription Rs. 6.50.

**Samarpan:** A Gujarati Fortnightly started in November 1959. Annual Subscription Rs. 6.50.

## **DEPARTMENT OF PRINTING**

Bhavan's press where all its publications and periodicals are printed and where practical training in printing is given to the students of the Bhavan's College of Journalism, Advertising and Printing.

## **COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM, ADVERTISING & PRINTING**

An Institution for providing systematic instruction in Journalism, Advertising, Sales Promotion, Public Relations and Printing.

## **M. M. COLLEGE OF ARTS & N. M. INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE**

The College was opened by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in June 1946. It is affiliated to the Bombay University for courses of studies leading to B.A., B.Sc., M.A., M.Sc., and Ph.D. degrees.

## **BHAVAN'S COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCE, DAKOR**

The College was opened by Dr. Jivraj Mehta, Chief Minister, Gujarat, in June 1962. It is affiliated to the Gujarat University for courses of studies leading to B.A. & B.Sc. degrees.

## **SARDAR PATEL COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING**

The College was opened in June 1962 for courses of studies leading to B.E. (Civil, Mechanical and Electrical) degree. It is affiliated to the Bombay University.

## **BHAVAN'S SCHOOL, NEW DELHI**

The School coaches students for the Cambridge School Leaving Examination, the medium of instruction being English. Sanskrit and Hindi are compulsory subjects. Music, Indian dancing and painting are also taught to the students.

## **BHAVAN'S ACADEMY OF LANGUAGES, NEW DELHI AND BOMBAY**

The Academy teaches four foreign languages, viz., German, Russian, French and Spanish.

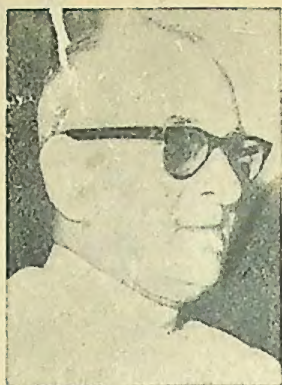
## **MUNGALAL GOENKA SANSKRIT TRUST**

The income from this Trust goes to support the Post-graduate and Research Department of the Bhavan.

## **ASSOCIATED BODIES**

Sanskrit Vishva Parishad, Bharatiya Stree Seva Sangh, Bombay Astrological Society.





### THE AUTHOR

KANAIYALAL MANEKLAL MUNSHI'S versatility and achievements are in a way unique. He is an eminent lawyer, one of the framers of India's Constitution and a seasoned statesman. Coming under the inspiring influence of Sri Aurobindo during his student days, Munshi has been an ardent fighter for India's freedom working at different stages in close association with Jinnah, Tilak, Besant, Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel and Pandit Nehru. His achievements as Home Minister of Bombay in 1937, as India's Agent-General in Hyderabad before the Police Action, as India's Food Minister and as Governor of Uttar Pradesh have been characterised by rare courage and decisive energy.

Acknowledged as the foremost writer in modern Gujarati literature, he has to his credit a vast and varied literature including novels, dramas, memoirs and history in Gujarati, as also several historical and other works in English, notably "Gujarat and Its Literature", "Imperial Gurjaras", "Bhagavad Gita and Modern Life", "Creative Art of Life", "To Badrinath", "Saga of Indian Sculpture", "The End of An Era", "Krishnavatara" and "Tapasvini".

